A CARDINAL SIN

By

Eugene Sue.

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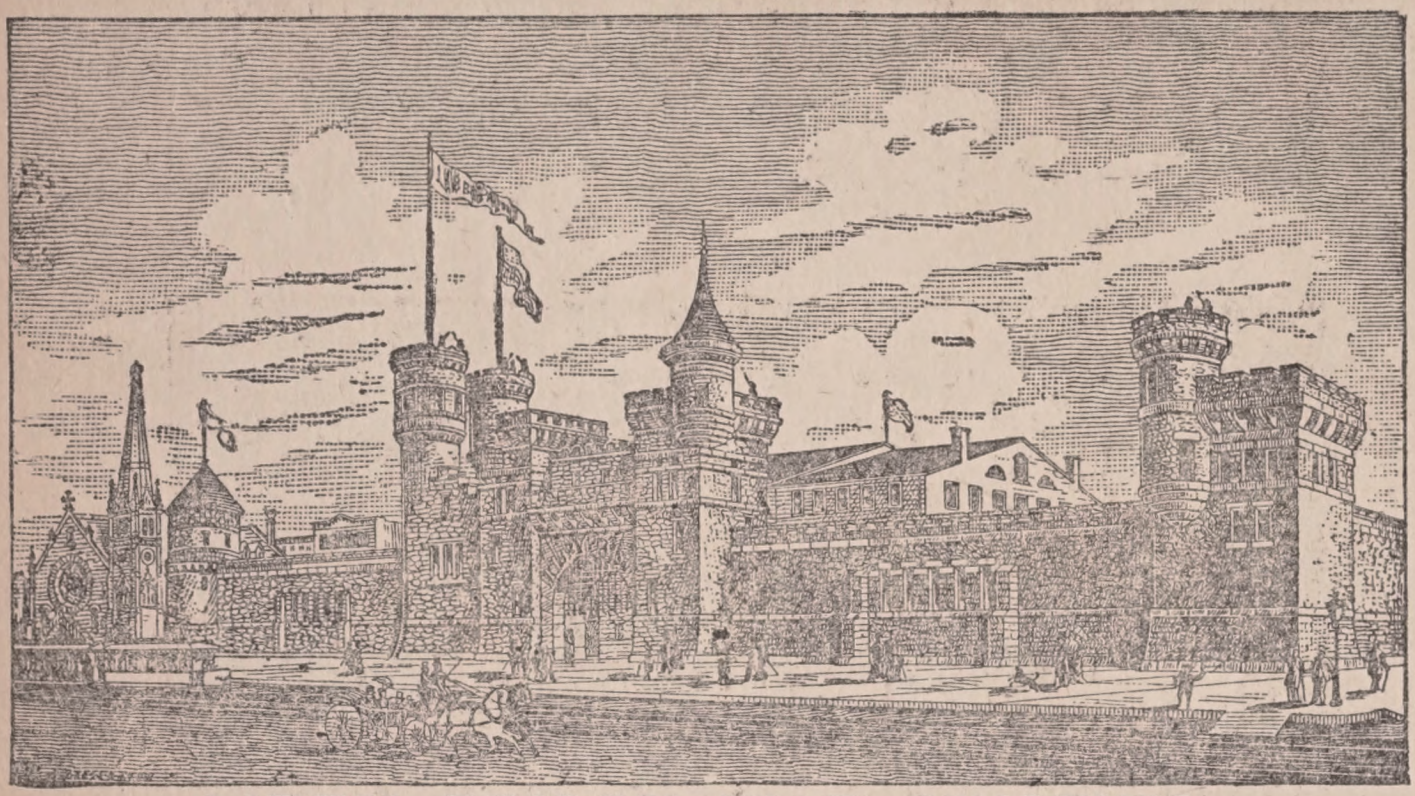

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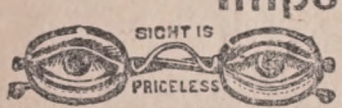

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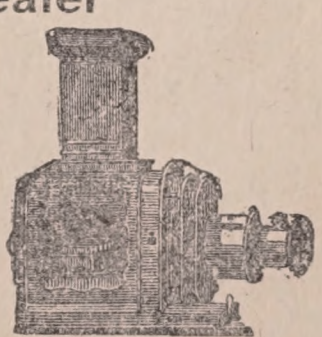

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"I PREFER TO DICTATE THE LETTER."

A CARDINAL SIN.

BY

EUGÈNE SUE.

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A Cardinal Sin.

CHAPTER I.

On a beautiful, bright morning of the month of May, 18—, a young girl of eighteen years or thereabouts, whose pale, melancholy face reflected only too plainly the wretchedness and privations of her daily life, was wending her way, timidly and with hesitating steps, through that populous quarter of the city known as the *Charnier des Innocents*, a dreary spot, principally noted for its large number of public scribes, who make a precarious living by acting as secretaries to the ignorant people of the vicinity.

Two or three times she paused, undecided, before an open door; then, thinking perhaps that the writer was either too young or unprepossessing, she slowly resumed her search. She had reached the last of the row, and was on the point of retracing her steps, when her

gaze fell on a venerable old man, whose benign countenance beamed kindly on her from his desk; and without further hesitation she resolutely entered the little shop.

Struck by the touching beauty and modest attitude of the young girl, the scribe greeted her with paternal affability, and discreetly drawing the curtain over the dingy window, motioned her to a seat, while he sank back into his old leather-covered arm-chair and waited for her to speak.

The girl's pretty face flushed and she cast down her large, blue eyes in embarrassment, while a painful silence followed. She was evidently agitated by a deep emotion, for her breast heaved visibly beneath the worn merino shawl she wore over her faded gingham dress, and her hands trembled slightly as she folded them on her lap.

"Why this embarrassment, my dear child?" said the old man kindly. "Do you wish me to draw up a petition, a request, or write a letter?"

"Yes, monsieur, I want a letter written," she replied in a low, soft voice, her face flushing still more painfully.

"Can you not write?"

She shook her head and cast down her eyes once more.

Fearing he had needlessly humiliated his client, the old man hastened to add:

"Poor child, do you suppose me capable of blaming your ignorance?"

"Monsieur! —" she began in protestation.

"Ah! believe me," he interrupted, "I feel a great deal of compassion for persons who, having no education, are forced to have recourse to men of my profession, to admit them into their confidence, and reveal their most secret and dearest thoughts! It is very painful, is it not?"

"Yes, indeed, monsieur!" exclaimed the girl, touched by these words. "To be obliged to address myself to a stranger, to —"

Her eyes filled with tears and she paused in confusion.

"My dear child, pray recover your composure," entreated the scribe. "You need fear neither indiscretion nor ridicule with me. The confidence reposed in me by persons whom chance or misfortune has deprived of the ben-

efits of education, has always been considered as sacred to me."

"Oh! thank you, monsieur; you relieve me of half my grief by understanding and excusing my embarrassment," said Mariette, gratefully. "Oh! yes," she went on with a sigh, "it is very cruel to know neither how to read nor write; but alas! it is not my fault."

"Ah! my poor child, like many others who come to me, it is the want of opportunity, and not the absence of good will, which has deprived you of knowledge. Some are forced to assume the care of younger brothers and sisters while the parents work; others are sent out as apprentices at an early age — "

"I was placed as an apprentice at the age of nine," sighed Mariette, "and until that time I was retained at home to care for a little brother, who died shortly before my parents."

"Poor child, your story is similar to those of your companions that come to me. But why did you not try to gain some education when you had finished your apprenticeship?"

"Where would I find the time, monsieur?

I work almost day and night to provide for my godmother and myself — "

"Time, alas! is the bread of the poor!" broke in the old man; "they must starve to death or live in ignorance."

He paused for a moment, then asked with renewed interest: "You speak of your godmother; have you no other relative?"

"No, Monsieur," replied the girl sadly.

"But forgive me, I am taking up your time uselessly instead of coming to the purpose of my visit."

"My time could not be better employed than in listening to you, my child; for I am sure you are a good and honest girl. Now let us see about the letter. Will you merely state what you wish to write, or do you prefer to dictate to me?"

"I prefer to dictate the letter."

"Very well, I am ready," declared the old man, adjusting his glasses and bending over his desk that he might not increase his pretty client's confusion.

With down-cast eyes, and after a moment of hesitation, Mariette began:

"Monsieur Louis—"

At the name of Louis the old man started, but said quietly: "It is written, my child."

Nothwithstanding her confidence in the old man, the girl instinctively shrank from revealing her inmost thoughts to a stranger. But after a momentary pause, she went on hesitatingly:

"I have received no word from you, and I am very sad. Yet, you had promised to write during your voyage—"

"During your voyage," repeated the writer, who had become suddenly thoughtful. "A strange coincidence," he said to himself, with growing anxiety. "His name is Louis, and he is away."

"I hope that you are well," continued the girl, "and that your silence is not caused by illness, for my grief would be doubled."

"To-day is the sixth of May, Monsieur Louis—*the sixth of May*—and I would not let the day pass without reminding you of me. Perhaps you had the same thought also, and I may receive a letter from you when you receive this from me, the day after to-morrow.

Then I shall know that the delay was not caused by illness or forgetfulness, and how happy I shall be! I shall therefore await the day after to-morrow with much impatience. May heaven protect me from disappointment. Monsieur Louis —"

Mariette stifled a sigh and wiped a tear from her pale cheek.

The features of the writer, who still bent low over his desk, were invisible to the young girl, and she was unconscious of the expression of alarm that had crept over them. Two or three times, while writing, he had cast furtive, scrutinizing glances at his client; and it was evident that his first impulse of sympathetic interest was changing to restraint caused by serious apprehensions.

Folding her hands once more on her lap, Mariette resumed:

"I have nothing new to tell you, Monsieur Louis. My godmother is still ill, she suffers very much, and the torture she undergoes embitters her character more and more. That I may be near her as much as possible, I now work at home instead of going to Mme. Jour-

dan. The days seem wretchedly long and sad, for working at the shop with my companions is much more cheerful, and I can accomplish more. I am therefore obliged to stay up very late; and I sleep but little, as my godmother always suffers more at night and, consequently needs more care. Sometimes I fail to hear her first call, I sleep so soundly; then she scolds me, which is only natural when she suffers so much.

"I tell you these things to show you that my life is not a happy one, and that one word of friendship from you would encourage and console me for so many sad things.

"Farewell, Monsieur Louis. I counted on Augustine to write; but she has gone away and I am dictating this letter to another person. Ah! never have I so much regretted my inability to read and write as at this moment. Farewell, once more, Monsieur Louis; think of me I beg you, for I think of you always."

"Is this all, my child?" queried the old man, after a moment of silence.

"Yes, monsieur."

"And what name shall I sign?"

"Mariette."

"Mariette only?"

"Mariette Moreau, if you please."

"Mariette Moreau," repeated the old man, as he inscribed the name.

Then folding the letter, he made a violent effort to conceal the secret anguish with which he awaited the reply to his question, and asked:

"To whom shall I address it?"

"To M. Louis Richard, at Dreux, to be called for."

"No more doubt of it," thought the old man, as he prepared to address the letter.

Had the young girl been less pre-occupied with her own thoughts, she could not have failed to remark the harsh expression which darkened the public writer's countenance when he learned beyond doubt to whom this innocent missive was addressed. In fact, he seemed unable to make up his mind to inscribe the name given, for when he had written the word "Monsieur," he suddenly dropped the pen and looked up.

"My dear child," he began, trying to smile

with his usual benevolence, that he might not betray his resentment and apprehensions, "although this is the first time we meet, it seems to me that I have inspired confidence in you."

"Indeed you have, monsieur," she assured him. "Before entering your house I feared I would not find the courage to dictate the letter to a total stranger; but you received me with so much kindness that my embarrassment has almost completely melted away."

"Why should you have felt any embarrassment, my child? Even though I were your father, I could not find a word to reproach you in what you have written to — to M. Louis — and if I did not fear to abuse your confidence in me I would ask — but no — it would be an indiscretion."

"What would you ask, monsieur?"

"Who this M. Louis Richard is."

'Oh! that's no secret, I assure you. M. Louis is a student; the notary's office in which he is employed is in the same building as the shop in which I work. That is how we met, just one year ago to-day."

"Ah! I now understand why you insisted on the date of your letter; to-day is the anniversary of your first meeting!"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And you love each other. There, don't blush, my child — I suppose you will marry some day?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Has M. Louis' family consented to the marriage?"

"M. Louis has no one to consult but his father, and we hope he will not refuse his consent."

"And what kind of a man is he?"

"The best of fathers — so M. Louis tells me — and a man who endures his poverty most courageously, although he once had a comfortable home. But M. Louis and his father are now as poor as godmother and myself; and this is why we expect no opposition to our marriage. No difficulty can arise between poor people."

"It seems to me that your godmother does not make life very happy for you, my child."

"What will you? it is so natural to be ill-

humored when one suffers incessantly and life is but a continual round of misfortunes."

"Is she a cripple?"

"She has lost one hand, besides being afflicted with a lung disease which has kept her confined to her bed for more than a year."

"How did she lose that hand?"

"She pricked her finger with a mattress needle, and as she could not stop work, blood poisoning followed, and she was forced to have her arm amputated."

"Poor woman," broke in the old man, absent-mindedly.

"As for her lung trouble, it is very common among women who continually breathe the dust arising from the wool used in mattresses. My godmother is almost bent double, and during her long paroxysms of coughing I am sometimes obliged to support her in my arms for hours."

"You alone, then, contribute to her support?"

"Certainly, since she is unable to work."

"Such devotion on your part is very generous."

"I only do my duty, monsieur. She gave me shelter after my parents died, and paid for my three years of apprenticeship in the shop. Is it not just that I should now care for her?"

"You must work very hard to earn sufficiently."

"From fifteen to eighteen hours a day."

"And instead of taking a much needed rest at night, you watch over your godmother?"

"Who would care for her if I did not?"

"Why not try to place her in the hospital?"

"She wonld not be admitted, as her case is incurable. Besides, I scarcely think I would have the courage to desert her thus."

"You are indeed a noble girl, my child, and I judged you rightly," declared the old man, grasping her hand in his.

"Oh! my God!" cried Mariette, as she saw his sleeve catch the inkstand, spilling the contents over the precious letter. "Ah! monsieur, what a misfortune!"

"What awkwardness!" exclaimed the writer angrily. "But never mind, I can copy it in a very few minutes. I shall read it aloud as I

go on, so that you may suggest any change you may think proper."

"I am so grieved to give you all this trouble," she murmured, evidently much distressed.

"It serves me right, my dear, — I alone am to blame."

As he resumed his work, a violent internal conflict seemed reflected on his features; from time to time a sigh of relief and satisfaction escaped his lips; then again he appeared confused and avoided Mariette's limpid gaze; while she leaned on the table, her head supported on one hand, anxiously and enviously following the rapid pen of the writer, as he traced the magic characters that would convey her thoughts to her lover.

"How much do I owe you, monsieur?" she asked timidly, when he had folded the missive and addressed it.

"Fifty centimes," rejoined the old man, after a moment of hesitation, "and remember that I charge you for one of the letters only. I alone am responsible for my awkwardness."

"You are very kind, monsieur," said Mari-

ette, touched by what she considered a proof of generosity on his part. "Indeed," she added, as she replaced her slender purse into her pocket, "you have been so good to me that I shall ask you a very great service —"

"Go on, my child."

"If I have more letters to send, it will be almost impossible for me to go to a stranger —"

"I shall always be at your service, my child."

"What I wished to say was, that my godmother is also unable to write or read, and the friend who was my confidante has gone to the country. So if I should receive a letter from M. Louis, would you have the goodness to read it for me? I would then dictate the answer at once."

"Certainly, my child; bring me all your letters," rejoined the old man, dissimulating his satisfaction. "I am indeed much gratified by the confidence you show in me. Good-bye, then. I hope you feel less embarrassment now than when you entered?"

"I did not expect so much kindness, monsieur."

"Try to look on me as your reader and secretary, my child. Does it not seem as though we had known each other for ten years."

"Indeed it does — Good-bye, monsieur."

Mariette had scarcely vanished, when the postman pushed the door open and handed in a letter, saying: "Here is a letter from Dreux, père Richard."

"A letter from Dreux!" exclaimed the old man, grasping it eagerly and examining the writing closely. "Ah! it comes from Ramon," he muttered to himself. "I wonder what he thinks of my son? Alas! what will now become of the fine projects so long formed between us!"

"Six sous, père Richard," observed the postman, arousing him from his reverie.

"Six sous!" cried the old man. "The devil! was it not prepaid? Ah! true enough," he sighed, as he regretfully handed the man the coin he had just received from Mariette.

CHAPTER II.

In the meantime, Mariette was hurrying homeward, somewhat uneasy at the thought of her long absence. Having reached that sad, gloomy street known as the Rue des Prêtres-Saint-Germain, she walked rapidly along until she came to the last dingy house facing the dark walls of the church, where she entered. Crossing an obscure passage, the girl ascended a rickety stairway, only dimly lighted from a small court-yard that resembled nothing more than a narrow well, and stopped at the door of the *portière*.

"Madame Justin," she said to the woman, who stood on the threshold, "have you been up to see if my godmother wanted anything?"

"I carried up her milk, Mademoiselle Mariette," replied the woman, "but she was in such a temper that she received me like a dog."

"We must take pity on her, Madame Justin; she suffers so much."

"Of course you always excuse her and suffer everything in silence, Mademoiselle Mariette. It shows your kind heart, but it does not alter the fact that your godmother is as wicked as a red mule. Poor child! you are doing your purgatory on earth; and if there is no Heaven, you will be well cheated."

"Good-bye, Madame Justin, I must go up now."

"Wait a moment, I have a letter for you."

"A letter!" cried Mariette, her cheeks flushing and her heart throbbing violently. "Is it from the provinces?"

"Yes; the postmark is from Dreux, and it costs her six sous. Here it is. The word 'Urgent' is written in one corner of the envelope."

The girl thrust the missive in her bosom; then drawing her purse, she took out her last ten sous piece and paid the woman. Taking her key, she then ran up the last stairs, her heart beating wildly with a sensation of mingled happiness and sadness. Though she was happy in the possession of the letter, the word "Urgent" on the corner of the envelope

filled her with misgivings; besides, what sadness filled her heart at the thought that perhaps several hours must elapse before she could learn what Louis Richard had written.

Having finally reached the fifth floor of the dilapidated house, so gloomy and ill-smelling, with its atmosphere poisoned by stagnant water in the defective sinks and sewers, she hesitatingly entered the dingy room occupied by her godmother and herself.

A woman was lying with her face to the wall, on the only bed that the room boasted; while the thin mattress that served Mariette as a couch was rolled in a corner, as much out of the way as possible. A work table, an old dresser, two chairs, and a few kitchen utensils hanging around the chimney, composed the sole furniture of this humble home, lighted only by a narrow window overlooking the gloomy yard, but the most rigorous neatness was remarkable everywhere.

The girl's godmother, Madame Lacombe, was a tall, gaunt woman of fifty years, with a cadaverous complexion and harsh, disagreeable

features. A bitter, sardonic smile, caused by a lifetime of misery and suffering, habitually contracted her livid lips, her form being almost bent double; her mutilated arm and bilious face, enframed in a ragged cap, through which hung long wisps of gray hair, were alone visible outside the coverings.

"Where have you been?" she cried, in a rasping voice, making an effort to turn in her bed as the girl entered.

"Dear godmother, I —" began Mariette.

"Oh, yes; you go running about the streets, leaving me here alone to fret and fume!" interrupted the woman furiously.

"But I was scarcely gone an hour," protested the girl.

"And you hoped to find me dead on your return, eh?"

"Heavens! how can you think such a thing!" sobbed Mariette.

"Oh! yes; you may whine now. But I am not your dupe! You have had enough of me; and the day when I am screwed down in my coffin will be a day of rejoicing for you — and so will it be for me, too — Oh! my God! this

is too much agony," she groaned, pressing her thin hand to hear breast.

Mariette wiped away the tears drawn by this harsh sarcasm, and approaching the bed, said sweetly: "You had such a bad night that I thought you might sleep a little in my absence."

"Oh! yes — you leave me here alone, to die like a dog, while you rún about the streets."

"I was obliged to go out, but Madame Justin promised — "

"I had rather see death itself than that creature," interrupted the sick woman angrily, "and you take every opportunity to send her to me."

A bitter smile flitted over the girl's lips; but she passed this new sarcasm unnoticed and said gently: "Shall I put fresh bandages on your arm?"

"It's too late now; you stayed away purposely."

"I am sorry I was delayed; but allow me to do it now."

"Leave me alone."

"But the wound will be inflamed."

"That's exactly what you are aiming at."

"Godmother, I beg you!"

"Don't come near me!" shrieked the sick woman furiously.

"I shall wait then," sighed the girl. "Shall I warm up your milk?"

"Milk! milk! and nothing but milk! — I am just sick of it. The doctor prescribed good chicken broth; and here it is Sunday, and I have had none since Tuesday."

"It's no fault of mine, godmother. The doctor prescribes — but money must be found to provide what he orders. And I can scarcely make twenty sous a day now."

"You don't mind what you spend on yourself," snapped Mme. Lacombe.

"You know well that I have worn nothing but this faded print dress all winter," rejoined Mariette, with touching resignation. "I economize as much as I can — and we owe two quarters of rent."

"You might as well say right now that I am a burden to you. These are the thanks I get for taking you out of the streets and pay-

ing for your apprenticeship! — you ungrateful, heartless child!"

"No, no, I am not ungrateful, godmother!" protested Mariette, restraining her tears with difficulty. "And, if you suffered less, you would not be so unjust to me— but do take something, or else you will be ill."

"I know it; I feel a terrible gnawing at my stomach."

"Please have some milk, godmother," entreated the girl.

"Go to the devil with your milk!" she snapped angrily.

"Shall I get you some fresh eggs?"

"No!"

"Will you have some rice?"

"I want some chicken!"

"But I can't get one on credit."

"You had twenty-seven sous in your purse this morning, and the quarter of a chicken will do me."

"But, godmother, that money—"

"Well, what about that money?"

"It's gone; I have only a few sous left."

"And where are those two ten-sous pieces? —Will you answer me?"

"I—I don't know," faltered the girl, reproaching herself bitterly for spending her money on the letters. "They must have dropped from my purse; for I have lost them."

"You lie!—I see it in your face."

"I assure you—"

"That's it," rejoined the sick woman, with a sardonic laugh, "she leaves me to rot on this wretched pallet, while she feasts on cakes and sweetmeats!"

"I?—Oh, my God!" moaned the girl.

"Out of here, you wretched creature! You may leave me to starve; but don't let me see your face again!" cried the unhappy woman, driven to desperation by the tortures she endured and the exasperating animosity of fate against her. "Ah! yes, you are very anxious to make me swallow that milk," she added, with a still more ironical laugh; "I am such a burden that you may have dropped something in it!"

At this accusation—still more senseless than atrocious—Mariette remained for a mo-

ment dumbfounded, not realizing the full meaning of the horrible words. But when their full sense burst upon her, she clasped her two hands together and shrank back in terror; then, unable to restrain her sobs any longer, and yielding to an irresistible impulse, she threw her arms about the sick woman's neck and, covering her face with tears and kisses, murmured brokenly: "Oh! godmother! godmother!"

This heart-broken protestation against an accusation which could have had its birth in a delirious brain only, fortunately recalled the sick woman to reason. Her heart relaxed a little under this flow of tears, and she realized her injustice.

"There, there, little one," she said with emotion, as she took one of the girl's trembling hands in hers and pressed the quivering form against her breast, "don't cry so—how foolish you are!—don't you see I was only jesting?"

Jesting! A sad jest, alas! worthy only of such abject misery.

"Yes; I was wrong to take your words seri-

ously," returned Mariette, wiping away the tears from her pale cheeks.

"What will you? you must take pity on your poor godmother, my little Mariette. By dint of suffering, you see, my gall has overflowed, and my heart is like my mouth—bitter, Oh, so bitter!"

"I know that you grumble in spite of yourself sometimes, godmother—Ah, it is so easy to be always cheerful and contented when one is happy; while you have found little happiness in your life."

"True enough," said the old woman, feeling a sort of cruel satisfaction in justifying her embittered character by the enumeration of her wrongs against an inplacable destiny; "true enough, many have fared as badly as myself, but few have fared worse. Beaten in my apprenticeship, beaten by a drunken husband, crippled and ill, I have dragged my chains for fifty years, and none can say that I have had one happy day—one single happy day in my accursed life. As we say, my little Mariette, my life has been without a single Sunday, while each day is a holiday to so many."

"Poor godmother, I can understand what you have suffered," murmured the girl, sympathetically

"No, no, you can never understand, although you have known much sorrow in your eighteen years. You are pretty, at least, and when you have a new frock, with a fresh bit of ribbon in your golden hair, you can smile at your reflection in the mirror and feel a moment of happiness."

"Oh, godmother! I—"

"Be frank, little one; admit that it makes you happy, and perhaps a little proud, too, when people turn their heads to look at you, in spite of your faded gown and coarse shoes."

"Indeed you are mistaken, godmother; it makes me blush to have any one look at me. When I worked at the shop, there was a gentleman who came every day and always gazed persistently at me while talking to Madame Jourdan, and it mortified me to death."

"Yes, but at heart you were pleased; and when you are old you will remember it. You will then have something like a reflection of

your youth; while I see nothing but gloom, and don't even know if I was ever young. But as for being ugly, I am sure of that."

"Oh! godmother!"

"Yes, I was so ugly that I could not bear the sight of a mirror. The consequence was that I found nothing better than a drunken husband, who nearly killed me with blows; and I was even deprived of the chance of rejoicing over his death, for I was obliged to pay his debts at the wine-shop. Then I became a cripple, and would starve were it not for you."

"You are unjust, godmother," observed Mariette, with a tender smile, trying to dispel her melancholy. "To my knowledge, you have had one happy day, at least, in your life."

"Which was that?"

"The day you gave me shelter, after my mother's death. Did not the good action give you satisfaction and make you happy for the day?"

"Well, if you call that a happy day — I want no more like it."

"Why?"

"It was rather one of my worst days!"

"Oh! godmother!" expostulated the girl sadly.

"Since my wretched husband's death, I had but myself to care for; but in taking charge of you, it was like being left a widow with a child to support. I call that anything but gay, when a woman can scarcely earn her own living. But you looked so charming with your pretty curly head and large blue eyes, and you seemed so sad kneeling beside your mother's coffin, that I had not the heart to let them take you to the asylum. And what a dreary night I spent, wondering what I would do with you, and what would become of you if work failed me! And you call that a happy day? No, no! Had I been in comfortable circumstances, I would have felt that your future was assured and been happy. But to merely exchange your misery for worse still was nothing to rejoice over."

'Well, let us say no more about days," said Mariette soothingly, smiling through her tears, "but let us speak of moments; for I am determined to show that you have experienced

some happiness. Now, for instance, take this moment — "

"Well, what of it?"

"I am sure that you are happy to see that I have dried my tears, thanks to your kind words."

The sick woman shook her head sadly.

"Do you know what I think when I get over my bad humor?" she said, with a sigh. "Well, I think that you must hate me for my harshness and injustice toward you. And I deserve it, too."

"Now you are going back to your melancholy thoughts," said the girl reproachfully.

"Admit that I am right. It's only natural, after all. You kill yourself working for me, you feed and nurse me, and I repay you with harsh words only. My death would indeed be a relief to you; and the sooner I am laid in my coffin the better."

"I know you are jesting once more," rejoined Mariette, making an effort to smile, though her heart was full to bursting.

"Well, if I am only jesting, little one, don't look so grieved," returned the old woman,

touched by the girl's evident distress. "Now put the milk on the fire, and bandage my arm while waiting for it to boil."

Mariette was as delighted over these orders as though they had been the kindest words in the world. She hastily lighted the fire; cut up their only remaining piece of bread into a dish of milk, placed it on the stove, and returned to the invalid.

In spite of the repugnance which the putrid sore inspired in her, Mariette showed as much patience as dexterity in cleansing and bandaging the mutilated arm; and the young girl's devotion, as well as her noble resignation, touched the woman's heart anew.

"Sisters of Charity are often praised, my dear," she said admiringly, "but none of them deserve half the praise you do."

"But those good sisters devote their time to strangers, godmother," protested the girl modestly, "while you are like a mother to me. I only do my duty, and therefore have no merit."

"Poor child, my affection for you brings you but little happiness. Only a few moments

ago I made you burst into tears; and to-morrow will be the same as to-day."

To escape from a reply to these bitter words, Mariette brought the steaming milk, which the invalid drank with appetite, and then busied herself in making the bed more comfortable.

"What will you eat, Mariette?" asked the old woman, as she swallowed the last spoonful.

"Oh! I have had my breakfast," said the girl bravely. "I bought a small loaf of rye bread this morning and ate it on my way — there, now," giving a last shake to the pillow, "you must try to sleep, you had such a bad night — are you more comfortable now?"

"Yes, thank you, child."

"I shall take my work near the window; the room is dark and this is very delicate work."

"What is it?"

"A fine cambric chemise, godmother. Madame Jourdan trusted me with it only after many recommendations not to lose this magnificent Valencienne trimming, which alone is worth two hundred francs. This brings the cost to three hundred francs apiece, and there

are two dozen to make. It seems they are intended for somebody's mistress," concluded the girl naïvely.

The invalid burst into a sardonic laugh.

"What is it?" asked Mariette in surprise.

"Such a funny idea."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mariette, with a vague feeling of apprehension, for she knew only too well the habitual character of her godmother's jests. "What idea, godmother?"

"I was asking myself of what use such people as you and I are in this world — wretched creatures, who know nothing but the sorrows and miseries of life; do you know, child?"

"Indeed, godmother, I scarcely know what to say."

"Why should a respectable girl like you, who has but two or three ragged chemises to her name, earn the paltry sum of twenty sous per day sewing chemises worth three hundred francs apiece, for —" She burst into another bitter laugh, and turned her face to the wall, saying: "Take up your work courageously, child! I shall try to dream of cemeteries to cheer me up!"

CHAPTER III.

Mariette's heart was fortunately too pure, and she was, moreover, too preoccupied with her own thoughts to feel the wretched bitterness of this last sarcasm. Drawing the letter she had received from her bosom, she placed it on her lap where her godmother's eyes could not reach it, and gazed longingly at it while continuing her work.

The regular breathing of the invalid soon convinced her that she was asleep, however, and she paused in her work long enough to tear open the envelope and spread the letter before her eyes. Vain and puerile curiosity! The characters were undecipherable to her! No picture could be more sorrowful and touching than the sight of this young girl, gazing with a fast beating heart at the unintelligible missive. One thing she remarked, however; the letter was very short, and this fact filled her with hope and uneasiness both.

Did this short, urgent letter announce good or bad news? she anxiously asked herself.

With her eyes fixed on the mysterious words, Mariette lost herself in conjectures and suppositions, fully convinced that so short a letter, after a prolonged absence, must inevitably bring unexpected news. In her poignant perplexity Mariette endured torments and excruciating torture, to which the uneducated are continually exposed. To hold in our grasp, and beneath our eyes, the few lines that bring us joy or sorrow, and be unable to penetrate the secret; to be under the necessity of asking a stranger to read these lines, and to receive from indifferent lips the announcement of something on which life itself almost depends, is an agony beyond words!

Mariette's anguish soon reached such a point that she resolved, at the risk of being cruelly treated on her return, to have recourse to the public scribe at once. Cautiously arising from her seat, that she might not arouse the sick woman, she tiptoed softly to the door; but as she crossed the threshold, a sudden painful thought stopped her. She could not

ask the scribe to read the letter without dictating a reply, and she possessed barely enough money to purchase the bread necessary for the day. She already owed the baker twenty francs, and he had refused her further credit; she could not, therefore, spend her last sou on what she considered as culpable prodigality. The reader may smile at this picture of overwhelming grief and cruel recriminations against herself *apropos* of a couple of fifty centime pieces. Alas! no sum is small or insignificant to the poor; an increase of ten sous in wages brings back life to the starved bodies, alleviates that living agony which leads so many to a premature grave.

For a moment the young girl was tempted to carry Louis' letter to the janitress; but fearing the gossip and perhaps the raillery of the woman, she preferred to make a painful sacrifice and not expose herself to new humiliations. She still possessed a pretty dress, bought at the Temple and altered to her figure, which she had worn only on the few occasions she had gone out with Louis. Taking the gown from its accustomed peg in the corner, she folded it

into a basket with a silk fichu that was almost new, and walked cautiously to the door once more.

"Going out again—" muttered her godmother, drowsily, as she turned over in her bed and dropped asleep once more.

Mariette stood motionless for a moment, then glided softly through the door and ran swiftly down the stairs.

Having obtained fifty sous on the gown and fichu at the *Mont-de-Piété*, she hurried toward the *Charnier des Innocents* in quest of the old scribe. Since Mariette's departure, and more especially since he had read his son's letter in the morning, the old man had reflected with ever-growing anxiety over the obstacles he might have to overcome to accomplish his cherished project, in view of the secret he had discovered during his interview with the young girl. He was still buried in painful meditation when Mariette suddenly appeared at the door.

"What is it, my child?" he asked, alarmed at this unexpected return. "I did not expect to see you back so soon."

"I have a letter from M. Louis, monsieur," she replied, her voice quivering slightly, as she drew the missive from her bosom, "and I have come to beg you to read it for me—and answer it if necessary."

Trembling with uneasiness and curiosity, she gazed intently at the old man while he glanced through the short letter, making a strong effort to conceal the annoyance given him by the few lines. Then suddenly starting up, and feigning great indignation, he tore the letter into shreds, crushed the pieces between his hands and hurled them under his desk.

"Ah, monsieur, what have you done!" cried Mariette in dismay.

"Ah! my poor child!" sighed the old man, looking at her pityingly.

"My God! something has happened M. Louis!" she gasped, clasping her hands together.

"No, my child--but you must forget him."

"Forget him?"

"Yes, believe me; you must renounce your cherished hopes."

"Heavens! what has happened?"

"Ignorance is a very sad thing, my poor child; and yet, at this moment, I would pity you if you could read."

"But, monsieur, what does the letter contain?"

"You must think no more of your marriage—"

"Does M. Louis write that?"

"Yes; he appeals to your generosity and delicacy, as well as your kindness of heart."

"M. Louis gives me up—and tells me to give him up also," she said slowly.

"Alas! yes, poor child! Come, be brave and resigned."

Mariette turned ghastly pale and stood silent for a moment, while big tears rolled down her cheeks; then, falling to her knees, she gathered the fragments of the torn letter and placed them on the desk before the old man's eyes.

"I shall have the courage to hear it through," she said sadly; "replace the pieces and read it."

"Please don't insist, my child, I beg of you" he rejoined, with hypocritical sympathy.

"In mercy, read it, monsieur!"

"But—"

"However painful it may be for me to listen, I must know its contents."

"I have already told you what it contained —spare yourself useless pain."

"Have pity on me, monsieur! In the name of heaven, read it—read it! I must at least know the full extent of my misfortune—and, besides, there may be one line or word of consolation."

"Since you insist on it, my poor child, I shall read it," said the old man, readjusting the torn pieces, while Mariette looked on with eyes dimmed with tears, her heart throbbing with anguish. "Here it is."

"My Dear Mariette:

"I write these few words in haste, my soul filled with the sadness of death. We must renounce our hopes, for I must secure comfort and rest for my father in his old days. You know how much I love my father. I have given my word, and we shall never meet again.

"One last prayer: I address myself to your delicacy of feelings and generosity of

heart — do not attempt to see me again, or change my resolution. I must choose between you and my father; and if I see you again I may not have the courage to do my duty as a son. My father's fate lies in your hands, and I count on your generosity. Farewell, I can write no more.

"Farewell once more, Farewell forever!

LOUIS."

Standing motionless beside the writer's desk, with downcast eyes and the tears rolling silently down her pale cheeks, her lips quivering and her hands clasped convulsively together, Mariette presented a fit model for the picture of "Despair," as she listened to the words that crushed her heart with such cruel force.

"There, I was sure the letter would pain you frightfully," observed the old man, looking up as he finished reading.

Mariette made no reply.

"Don't tremble so, my child," resumed the old scribe, "sit down — here, take this glass of fresh water."

Mariette did not even hear; but still stood

gazing fixedly at the torn letter, though she saw it but dimly through her tears.

"It is all over, then," she murmured brokenly. "Nothing — nothing more in this world! — I was too happy. Ah! I am like godmother; happiness was not made for me! — "

Her voice died out in a stifled sob, and a pang of remorse smote the old man as he gazed at her white, set face.

"My dear child," he said soothingly, "pray don't give way to despair."

These words recalled the young girl to herself; she wiped away her tears and, bending down, slowly gathered the pieces of the letter.

"What are you doing?" cried the scribe, in alarm. "Why should you preserve these fragments, which can only recall cruel souvenirs?"

"The tomb of some one we have loved, also recalls painful and cherished souvenirs," said Mariette, sadly, "and yet we do not desert it."

Having replaced the pieces in the envelope, she again thrust it in her bosom; and, drawing her thin shawl closely about her shoulders, turned toward the door. On the threshold,

however, she paused hesitatingly and looked back at the old man.

"Thank you very much for your kindness, monsieur," she said gratefully; then, after a moment's silence, she added timidly: "Although there is no answer to this letter, I feel that after so much trouble I should offer you —"

"It will be ten sous, the same as a letter," interrupted the scribe; and without the least scruple or hesitation, he pocketed the remuneration with a sort of sensual pleasure, entirely unimpaired by the girl's wretchedness.

"Good-bye, my poor child," he said, "I hope we shall meet again under happier circumstances."

"May heaven grant it, monsieur."

She walked slowly away, while old Richard closed the shutters of his shop and prepared to return home.

Haunted by the most somber thoughts, and a prey to the most poignant emotions, Mariette walked mechanically onward, unconscious of surroundings, and of the way she went, until startled by the sight of the river.

"Fate has brought me here," she said with a shudder.

Crossing to the opposite side of the bridge, she leaned on the parapet and gazed at the rapid waters of the stream. Little by little, she began to experience that strange fascination caused by the attraction of the abyss; and as her eyes followed the swift current, she felt overtaken by a sort of vertigo and drawn more and more toward the flowing waters.

"Here is oblivion and an end to all sorrows!" thought the unhappy girl. "It is a sure refuge against all miseries, against fear and hunger, illness and unhappy old age — wretched as that of my godmother's — Ah! what would become of her without me? — "

At that moment she felt her arm grasped violently, and a frightened voice cried out: "Look out, child, or you will fall into the river!"

The girl drew back shuddering, and gazed wildly around her.

"Do you know that you are very imprudent, to say the least of it, my child," said a good-natured looking woman, who stood beside her.

"You were leaning so far over the parapet that I thought you would lose your footing any moment."

"Thank you, madame," replied Mariette, "I am very careless, indeed."

"You must be more careful, my dear," returned the woman warningly. "Heavens! how pale you are — are you ill?"

"I feel a little faint, madame," said the girl, feeling a painful dizziness come over her, "but it will pass away."

"Lean on me, then. You are, no doubt, just recovering from a serious illness?"

"Yes — that's it, madame," responded Mariette, passing her hand over her brow, "but where am I?"

"At the *Pont au Change* — Are you a stranger in Paris?" asked the woman, curiously.

"No, madame; but I was overcome with a strange feeling of dizziness a few moments ago. It is passing over now, and I recognize the surroundings."

"You had better take my arm, you are trembling so," suggested the kind-hearted woman.

"Thank you, madame; it's not necessary, I live only a few steps from here."

"Well, good-bye, and be very cautious."

Having recovered the entire possession of her senses, Mariette now felt her bitter sorrows even more keenly than before; and she trembled at the thought of the harsh reception that awaited her in her desolate home, when she had so much need of consolation, or, at least, of that isolation and sad tranquility which lulls the most intense grief into calm hopelessness.

Being anxious to mitigate the cruel reproaches which her prolonged absence would inevitably draw upon her, she bethought herself of her godmother's desire to obtain the part of a chicken, and determined to satisfy this whim in the hope of being forgiven. She therefore hastened to the neighboring shops, purchased the quarter of a fowl and two white rolls with what remained of the money obtained on her gown and fichu, and turned homeward once more.

As she neared the house she was somewhat surprised to see an elegant cabriolet before the door; but she entered without giving the cir-

cumstance another thought, and stopping at the lodge asked for her key.

"Your key, Mademoiselle Mariette?" said Madame Justin, "why, a gentleman has just gone up with it."

"What gentleman?" queried the girl.

"A decorated gentleman. And finely decorated, too, I assure you. A ribbon two good inches wide — and such a loop! Upon my word, I never saw a man more beautifully decorated."

"But I don't know any decorated gentleman," exclaimed the girl in astonishment. "He must be mistaken."

"No, indeed. He inquired for a woman named Lacombe, a cripple living with her god-daughter, who is a seamstress. There is no mistake, as you see."

"Didn't you tell him that my god-mother was ill and could see no one?"

"Yes, I did. But he said he must see her on very important and urgent business; so I gave him the key and let him go up alone, having no desire to be abused by your god-mother."

More and more astonished, Mariette ascended the rickety stairs to the fifth floor, pausing on the landing to recover her breath and find some excuse for her long absence. The door being ajar, she caught a glimpse of a stranger within the room, and the next moment distinctly heard these words:

"I am delighted to find your god-daughter away, my good woman; I can explain myself more clearly without her presence."

Mariette, who had been on the point of entering, yielded to an involuntary sentiment of curiosity instead, and remained where she stood.

CHAPTER IV.

The stranger was a man of forty-five years, or thereabouts, with worn but regular features, bearing deep traces of excessive dissipation and the most absolute profligacy. His physiognomy offered a strange mixture of deceit and impertinence; and these disagreeable traits were still more emphasized by a dark heavy moustache, which shone with a lustre equaled only by the false ebony of his artistically curled hair. His hands and feet were large; and, notwithstanding his visible pretentions, he at once betrayed the vulgar personage destined, not to imitate, but to parody veritable elegance. His dress was pompous, and in exceedingly bad taste; and even Mariette could not refrain from a smile at his affected military attitude and the ridiculously large red ribbon that adorned his buttonhole.

Madame Lacombe, who had once more re-

turned to her gloomy and sardonic humor, was gazing at the stranger with as much astonishment as distrust, feeling an almost invincible aversion against this insolent and patronizing personage, who had unceremoniously taken a seat at some distance from the bed, and was nibbling at the gold head of his cane while pursuing the conversation with her.

"Yes," repeated the visitor, "I am delighted to find you alone; as I was saying, I can explain myself more clearly."

"Monsieur," said the invalid, in a crabbed tone, "you have asked me if my name was Lacombe and if I was Mariette Moreau's godmother. I have already told you *yes*. Now what do you want of me? Explain yourself."

"To begin with, my good woman —" he began.

"I am called Madame Lacombe!" interrupted the woman.

"The devil! Well, then, Madame Lacombe," resumed the stranger with mock deference, "I shall first tell you who I am, and then proceed to explain what I want."

"Go on."

"I am called Commander de La Miraudière, an old military officer, as you see," pointing to the red ribbon on his coat; "ten campaigns and five wounds!"

"That's nothing to me. And then?"

"I have the most brilliant acquaintances in Paris: dukes, counts, marquises —"

"What's that to me?"

"I keep a carriage, and spend at least twenty thousand francs a year."

"While my god-daughter and myself are starving on twenty sous per day—that is, when she can earn them!" exclaimed the invalid bitterly. "Such is the justice of the world!"

"No! it is not justice!" protested the commander. "It is not just, and I am here to put an end to such injustice!"

"If you are here to laugh at me," rejoined the woman, with an ominous scowl, "you had better go."

"Laugh at you, madame! — I! — judge me by what I offer. Do you want a pretty room, in a fine house, a servant to wait on you, two delicious meals every day, coffee every morning, and fifty francs a month for your snuff or

other little fancies? Eh! what do you say to that?"

"I say — I say — that it's all a lie — or else there is something beneath it. When one offers so much to a poor, crippled old woman, it is not for the love of God, I am sure."

"You are right, Mamma Lacombe; it's for the love of two beautiful eyes."

"Whose eyes?"

"Your god-daughter's eyes, Mamma Lacombe," returned Commander de La Miraudière cynically. "No use beating around the bush, you know."

"You know Mariette, then?" she said, with a piercing glance at his dissipated face.

"I often visit Madame Jourdan's establishment, for I am exceedingly fond of fine linen," he observed, casting a complaisant glance on the embroidered folds of his shirt. "I therefore found frequent occasion to admire your god-daughter; I think her beautiful and charming, and —"

"And you want to buy her from me?"

"Bravo! you are a woman of intelligence and good sense, Mamma Lacombe. You un-

derstand things without needless words. Now, this is my proposition: A fine, elegantly furnished apartment for Mariette, with whom you shall live, of course; five hundred francs per month for her expenses, exclusive of maid and cook; a suitable trousseau for the girl; and a purse of fifty louis to begin housekeeping, not counting costly gifts for good conduct. Besides this, there will be carriages, operas, balls, and a host of friends among ladies of my acquaintance. In a word, she will lead an enchanted existence—the existence of a duchess! What do you think of it?"

"Why not?" murmured the woman, with a strange smile. "Poor wretches like us are only good to sell ourselves when we are young, or sell others when we are old."

"Come now, Mamma Lacombe; to quiet your honest scruples, we shall say sixty francs per month for your pin money, and throw a superb shawl into the bargain. This will enable you to appear to advantage beside Mariette, whom you must watch with motherly solicitude, and never allow out of your sight, for I am jealous as a tiger, and don't like to be deceived."

"Only this very morning," put in the sick woman, "I was saying to Mariette, 'You are a respectable girl, and barely earn twenty sous per day sewing on chemises worth three hundred francs apiece, for a kept woman.'"

"Chemises worth three hundred francs apiece, ordered from Madame Jourdan? Let me see—ah! yes, I know. They must be for Amandine, the mistress of the Marquis de Saint-Herem, my most intimate friend—I recommended the establishment—a veritable fortune for Madame Jourdan, although that devil of a marquis seldom pays. But, on the other hand, all the furnishers and women he patronizes become the rage. Amandine was but an obscure little shop-girl six months ago, and now she is the most fashionable woman in Paris. And Mariette may have the same luck, you know. Fancy her wearing chemises worth three hundred francs apiece, instead of sewing them! Doesn't it make you feel like bursting with pride, Mamma Lacombe?"

"Unless Mariette ended like a girl of my acquaintance, who also sold herself through misery."

"What happened her?"

"She was robbed."

"Robbed?"

"She was promised mountains of gold, too; but at the end of three months she was deserted and left without a single sou. Then she killed herself in despair."

"The devil! what do you take me for?" cried the visitor, haughtily. "Do I look like a swindler; a *Robert Macaire?*"

"I don't know what you are."

"I, an old soldier! twenty campaigns and ten times wounded! The intimate companion and friend of all the *lions* of Paris! a man with his own carriage and who spends twenty thousand francs per annum! The devil! be frank with me! Do you require securities or advances? Very well, then; the house shall be furnished within a week and the lease signed in your own name to-morrow, with the payment of a whole year in advance; besides, if we come to terms, here are twenty-five to thirty louis to bind the bargain."

Drawing twenty-eight gold pieces from his pocket, he tossed them on the work-table be-

side the bed, saying: "I am not like you, Mamma Lacombe; I am not afraid of being robbed."

At the clinking of gold, the sick woman leaned out of her bed and cast a glance of covetousness at the glittering pieces.

In all the course of her miserable existence, she had never possessed a single gold piece, and the sight of the scattered louis before her eyes almost dazzled her. Grasping a few in her withered fingers, she held them up to the light, trying to catch the sun's rays that she might feast her hungry eyes on their sparkling beauty.

"I had to show the bait to catch the old witch," said the tempter to himself, with a contemptuous smile.

"At last, at last I have touched the glittering gold!" muttered the old woman, jingling the yellow pieces in her hand.

"Touching them is nothing; the agreeable part of it is to spend them, Mamma Lacombe."

"And this is enough to live in comfort for four or five months," she went on, piling up the coins with childish glee.

"You and Mariette will have as much for every month of the year, if you only say so," said the tempter. "Yes, all this gold; do you hear? in pure, glittering gold!"

There was a long interval of silence; then, raising her sunken eyes to the visitor, the invalid said wistfully: "You think Mariette pretty and charming, monsieur, do you not? You are right; there is not a better creature in the world. Now, be generous toward her! This sum is nothing for a rich man like you—give it to us as a gift."

"What!" gasped the astounded man.

"Monsieur, you are good and kind, pray be charitable also," pleaded the woman.

"This sum, so insignificant to you, would set us afloat once more. We could pay our debts, and Mariette would not be obliged to kill herself working. She would then find time to seek a more remunerative position, and we would owe you five or six months of tranquillity, of paradise—we live on so little! Come, my good sir, do that and we shall bless your name forever—and I can say that I was happy once in my life."

The request was so naïve, the tone so sincere and earnest that the decorated visitor was more hurt than surprised at this proposition. He could neither understand nor believe that a human being could be stupid enough to seriously make such a request to a man of his stamp.

"This is anything but flattering," he muttered to himself; "the old witch must take me for a young duckling ready to be plucked."

"The devil! Mamma Lacombe," he added aloud, bursting into a sneering laugh, "do you take me for a philanthropist, the inspector of charitable institutions, or a candidate for the Montyon prize? Tut, tut, you will rot in your bed before you receive charitable gifts of six hundred francs, redeemable in blessings and grateful thanks, my good woman! Bless my stars, I am not a bank of that sort!"

The sick woman had yielded to one of those wild, sudden hopes, which sometimes sway the most distrustful beings, and even the most hardened victims of implacable destiny. But the withering scorn it had brought upon her aroused all her ire and bitterness of heart.

"Pardon me, Monsieur, if I have insulted you!" she rejoined, with her habitual sardonic laugh.

"I am not offended, Mamma Lacombe," he returned magnanimously; "but let us come to the point. Shall I, yes or no, re-pocket these beautiful louis, which you take so much pleasure in handling?"

He stretched his hand toward the gold pieces, but she thrust it away with an instinctive movement and drew the shining coins nearer to her.

"One moment," she said hoarsely, her eyes glittering with cupidity in their deep orbits, "I shall not eat your gold!"

"That is just what I am urging you to do, Mamma Lacombe; I want you to eat that gold, on condition —"

"I know Mariette," she interrupted, her wistful gaze still fixed on the gold, "she will never consent."

"Nonsense!"

"I tell you she is an upright girl. She might, like many others, yield to a man she loved; but to you — never! She would refuse,

I am sure. You may laugh, but she has ideas of her own."

"Granted, my good woman. I believe in Mariette's good principles, for Madame Jourdan has known her many years and she has full confidence in her."

"Well, then?"

"Well, I also know, Mamma Lacombe, that you possess great influence over her and that she fears you like the devil himself — so Madame Jourdan informed me. Now, you can induce, or, if need be, compel Mariette to accept happiness! For, after all, you are lodged like beggars and starving to death. Besides, if you refuse, do you know what will happen? The girl, with her fine sentiments of disinterestedness, will, sooner or later, become the victim of some unscrupulous rascal as poor as herself."

"That may be, but she will not have sold her soul."

"Tut, tut, tut, those are mere phrases. Some fine day, this lover of her choice will probably desert her; then, to save herself from

starvation, she will end like the rest — mark my word."

"Yes, that may be," she repeated, with a dismal moan. "Hunger is a bad counselor, when we and our children have known its pangs. And how many of those poor, unhappy girls might be saved with this gold! And if Mariette were destined to end like them — would it not be better to yield now?"

For a few moments, the most varied emotions were depicted on the pale, emaciated features of the unhappy, crippled creature. With eyes still fixed hungrily on the glittering pieces, she strove to calm the struggle waged between misery and virtue in her heart; then, by a desperate effort, she closed her eyes as if to escape the fascination of the gold, and sank back wearily on her wretched pallet.

"Go, and leave me in peace!" she said feebly, as if exhausted by the violent conflict.

"What! you refuse?" he cried in amazement.

"Yes."

"Positively refuse?"

"Yes."

"Very well, I shall take back my gold," he rejoined, slowly picking up the louis and jingling them together. "I shall refill my pockets with the glittering yellow coins."

"The devil take you and your gold!" cried the exasperated woman. "Take it, and go! I have not sheltered Mariette all these years to sell her, body and soul. Rather than eat such bread, I would build a charcoal fire and make an end to us both."

At these words Mariette entered, pale and indignant, her cheeks bathed in tears and her eyes flashing with anger and scorn.

"Ah! god-mother," she cried, throwing her arms around the woman's neck, "I knew that you loved me as a daughter!" Then turning toward Commander de La Miraudière, whom she recognized as the man whose persistent gaze had so frequently annoyed her at Madame Jourdan's establishment, she added with withering scorn: "Go, this moment, monsieur!"

"But, my dear little dove —" he began.

"I was there at the door, monsieur, and heard all," she interrupted quickly.

"So much the better then, my dear. You know my offer; you are still at liberty to accept it."

"Once more, monsieur, I beg you to go out."

"There, there, I am going my little Lucretia! But I give you a week for reflection," said the visitor, as he moved toward the door. Pausing on the threshold, however, he added: "Don't forget my name, my dear — Commander de La Miraudière. Madame Jourdan has my address," and he vanished with these words.

"Ah! godmother," cried the girl, kissing the sick woman with new effusion, "how warmly you defended me! how your heart spoke for me!"

"Yes, yes," muttered the invalid, roughly disengaging herself from the girl's embrace, "and with those fine principles we starve instead of rolling in luxury."

"But, my dear godmother —" Mariette tried to protest.

"There, there, it's all said and done now," cried the woman impatiently. "I have done

my duty, and you have done yours — and it's small good it will do either of us, you may count on that!"

"But godmother, listen to me —"

"And if some fine morning we are both found dead with a charcoal fire between us, we shall only have done our duty once more. Ha! ha! ha! —" and with this grim laugh, this unhappy creature, so pursued and exasperated by wretchedness and misfortune, cut short the conversation by turning her face to the wall.

Mariette silently brought in the basket containing her purchases, arranged the supper on the table near the bed, and quietly withdrew to the narrow window through which filtered the deepening twilight. Then drawing the torn fragments of Louis' letter from her bosom, she gazed at them sadly, and sank back into grim despair.

* * * * * * * *

In the meantime, Commander de La Miraudière had reached the street and was rolling away rapidly in his dashing cabriolet.

"Bah! this is only a first rebuff," he was

saying complacently to himself; "the girl will reflect, and that old schemer will think better of it. Her round eyes fairly blinked at the sight of my gold; it dazzled her like the noonday sun. Besides, their abject misery will plead in my favor, and I have no reason to despair. Two months of fat living will suffice to make the girl the prettiest woman in Paris; and she will do me credit at very small cost. But I must think of business now; I have made a precious discovery."

Having reached the Rue Grenelle-Saint-Honoré, he stopped his horse before a house of modest appearance and alighted.

"Does M. Richard reside here?" he inquired of the concierge.

"Yes, monsieur, both the father and son live here," replied the man.

"I want to speak to the son, M. Louis Richard; is he at home?"

"He has just arrived in Paris; you will find him with his father."

"I must see him alone."

"That's rather difficult, as they have but one room between them."

The commander drew a card from his pocket, and wrote the following words above his own name: "Will expect M. Louis Richard at my home, between nine and ten o'clock to-morrow morning, to communicate something of grave importance, which admits of no delay."

"My dear fellow," he said, addressing the concierge, when he had replaced his pencil, "here are forty sous for a *pourboire*."

"Thank you, monsieur," rejoined the man, pocketing the money; "but what do you expect me to do for it?"

"Remit this card to M. Louis Richard."

"Nothing difficult about that."

"It must be given him to-morrow morning as he goes out, and without his father's knowledge; do you understand?"

"Perfectly. It can be easily done, as M. Louis goes to his studies at seven o'clock, while old Richard leaves only at nine for his writing office."

"I may count on you then?" said the commander, leaping into the cabriolet.

"Consider it done, monsieur," was the reassuring reply.

The carriage had scarcely vanished when the postman appeared with a letter addressed to M. Louis Richard. It was Mariette's missive, which the old scribe had addressed Rue de Grenelle, Paris, instead of Dreux, according to the girl's request.

CHAPTER V.

Old Richard and his son jointly occupied a dreary room on the fifth floor of a dilapidated house, which might have made a fit adjunct to the home of Mariette and her god-mother. The same wretchedness, the same destitution was visible everywhere. A thin mattress in one corner for the father, a straw bed in the other for the son, a mouldy table, a few chairs and an old wardrobe, composed the entire furniture of the dingy apartment.

On his way homeward, the public scribe had purchased his supper and was now laying the frugal meal on the table; an appetizing slice of ham, placed carefully on a piece of white paper that served as a plate, and a four-pound loaf of bread, the remains of which were to serve as breakfast the next morning. Add to this a bottle of fresh water, standing opposite a thin candle that scarcely dissipated the gloom of

the room, and the picture of wretchedness was complete.

Louis Richard was a young man of about twenty-five years, with a frank, open countenance, expressive of gentleness and intelligence, and a natural grace which his shabby, worn-out clothes could not conceal. As he dropped his modest traveling bag to the floor and embraced his father, whom he fairly worshipped, the happiness of being near him once more and the certainty of seeing Mariette the next day, made his face perfectly radiant with joy.

"And so you made a good voyage, my son," observed the old man, his delight over the young man's return somewhat dampened by the uneasiness he felt concerning his cherished projects for the future and the remembrance of the events of the day.

"Excellent, father!" returned Louis.

"I am glad to hear it, my boy, and—but will you have some dinner? We can talk while eating."

"Will I have some dinner? Well, I should say so! I did not share the meals of the other

travelers, and for the best of reasons," laughed the young man gaily, slapping his empty wallet.

"Upon my word, you lost but little, my son," rejoined the father, cutting the slice of ham into two unequal pieces and giving the largest to the young man, "those hotel dinners are expensive and not worth much!"

Having offered Louis a formidable piece of bread, the old man helped himself to a crust, and both father and son bravely attacked the meager meal, with robust appetites, sprinkling it plentifully with glorious draughts of clear water.

"Tell me all about your journey now, my boy," resumed the old man, when he had satisfied the first pangs of hunger.

"Really, father, there is not much to tell," remarked Louis. "The notary had given me copies of several deeds, which M. Ramon was to read. Well, he read and studied them most leisurely, taking five whole days! after which the said papers were given back to me, profusely annotated by that wary personage, and—thank heaven—here I am at last!"

"Thank heaven?—can it be that you were lonely at Dreux?" queried the old man, looking up anxiously.

"I was bored to death, my dear father."

"What kind of a man must this M. Ramon be, that you were so displeased?"

"The very worst kind in the world—a miser."

"Hum! hum!" coughed the old man, as if swallowing a disagreeable dose. "So he is a miser? He must be rich then?"

"I don't know, but one may be as avaricious with a small fortune as with a great one; and if we are to measure M. Ramon's wealth by his parsimony, he must be a triple millionaire — such a wretched old miser!" continued Louis, contemptuously, biting into his bread with a sort of frenzy.

"Had you been brought up in luxury and abundance, I might understand your recriminations against this old miser—as you call him," rejoined old Richard, testily, "but we have always lived in such poverty that, however miserly M. Ramon may be, you must have

found but little difference between his manner of existence and our own."

'But you don't understand me, father. M. Ramon keeps two servants, and we have none; he occupies a whole house and we live in one attic room; he has three or four dishes for his dinner, while we eat anything we may chance to have. And yet, we live a hundred times better than this greedy personage!"

"I really don't understand you, my child," returned the father, more and more annoyed at his son's opinion of his late host. "There can certainly be no comparison between that gentleman's luxury and our poverty."

"My dear father, we are veritably poor, at least! We cheerfully endure our privations; and if in my days of ambition, I have sometimes dreamed of a more comfortable existence, it was not for myself, you may rest assured, for I am perfectly satisfied with my fate."

"I know your kind heart, my dear boy, as well as your love for me; and my only consolation in our poverty is to know that you do not complain of your condition."

"Complain! do you not share it with me?

and then, after all, what more could we want?"

"We might want a little more comfort."

"Upon my word, I don't see it in that light, father. We don't eat stuffed chicken, it is true; but we eat all we want and with appetite — witness this empty paper and the disappearance of the four-pound loaf between us. Our clothes are shabby and worn, but they are warm; our room is up five flights of stairs, but it shelters us; we earn from sixteen to eighteen hundred francs per annum between us — the sum is not enormous, but it suffices; we have no debts! Ah! my dear father, may heaven never send us worse days, and I shall never complain."

"My dear boy, I cannot tell you how happy it makes me to hear you speak thus, and to see you accept your fate so bravely. Tell me the truth — have you — have you always been happy?"

"Very happy."

"Truly?"

"Why should I try to deceive you? Now, my dear father, have you ever seen me gloomy

or thoughtful? do I look like a discontented person?"

"You are endowed with such an excellent character!"

"Oh, that depends on circumstances! If, for instance, I were obliged to live with M. Ramon, that abominable griping miser, I should certainly become unbearable, unmanageable and frantic!"

"What can you have against that poor man?"

"All the ferocious resentment and rancour gathered during five days of torture!"

"Torture?"

"What else can it be, to inhabit a large dilapidated house, so empty, so cold and gloomy, that a tomb would be a cheerful dwelling in comparison? And then, to see the two wan, emaciated servants coming and going like shadows in this sepulchre; to assist at those meals — and what meals, great heavens! — where the master of the house seems to count the bites you swallow! And such a daughter! — for the wretch has a daughter, alas! and

his race may perhaps be perpetuated. It is she who lays aside the servants, insufficient shares and puts the remains of the meager meal under lock and key! All I can say is that, notwithstanding my usual good appetite, five minutes at that table sufficed to disgust me. For one is either one thing or the other; if rich, avarice is contemptible; if poor, it is stupid to attempt any display."

"My dear Louis, I find you strangely hostile to this poor man and his daughter — you who are always so kind and benevolent!"

"His daughter! do you call that a daughter?"

"What in the devil do you mean! do you take her for a monster?"

"I don't take her for a woman."

"My dear boy, you must have taken leave of your senses!"

"But, my dear father, what would you call a tall, dry creature, growling and snarling, with hands and feet like a man, a face like a nut-cracker, and a nose — great heavens, what a nose! — as long as this knife, and red as a

brick! But to be just, I must admit that this incomparable creature has yellow hair and black teeth."

"The portrait is not flattering; but all women cannot be equally beautiful. A kind heart is often better than a pretty face; and as for me, ugliness has always inspired me with pity."

"I will say that I was much inclined to pity her when I saw her disagreeable face at first, especially as she was condemned to live with a man as greedy as her father; but when I saw that red-nosed creature eternally nagging and growling at those two unhappy servants, measure their food, and rival with her father in avarice, my first impulse of compassion was immediately turned to aversion for that wicked *red-nose.* Notwithstanding my good nature, I felt a strong temptation to contradict and annoy this *red-nose;* but, fearing to compromise my employer's interests, I kept my peace and swallowed my rancour."

"And you are relieving your mind with a vengeance."

"Ah! what a relief, after five long days of that *red-nose!*"

"You are painfully prejudiced, my son; I would wager that this lady, who appears so miserly and detestable in your eyes, is merely a woman of firm character and economical habits."

"Well, it matters little to me what she is! Only, I must say, there seems to exist singular contrasts in certain families."

"What do you mean?"

"Imagine my surprise in discovering in one of the rooms of this dull house, the portrait of a woman so beautiful, charming and distingué, that it seemed placed there expressly to continually mock and scoff at that wicked *red-nose*. The portrait so closely resembled one of my old class-mates, that I could not refrain from questioning the old miser about it. He then gruffly informed me that the original was his sister, Madame de Saint-Herem, who died some years since. But you would have died laughing had you seen them when I asked if she had left a son."

"Well, what did they do?"

"At the name of young Saint-Herem you would have thought I had evoked the devil.

Red-nose grew fiery and fairly glowed; while her worthy father admitted, with a withering glance at me, that he had the misfortune, in fact, to be the uncle of an infernal young bandit known as Saint-Herem."

"This young man must bear a very bad reputation."

"Florestan? — why, he is the noblest and most charming fellow in the world!"

"But his uncle tells you —"

"My dear father, Saint-Herem and myself were close friends at college, and you must judge of him by what I shall relate. I had lost sight of him for years, when, as I was passing along the boulevard six months ago, I saw everybody turn to look at something on the road, and I did likewise. I then perceived two magnificent horses harnessed to a phaeton, with two tiny domestics behind. This equipage was so elegant and rich that it attracted general attention — and who do you suppose was seated in that carriage? My old classmate Saint-Herem, more brilliant and handsome than ever!"

"It seems to me he must be a reckless spendthrift."

"Wait till I have finished my story, father. The equipage stopped abruptly, and while the two little pages alighted from their seats to hold the horses by the bridles, Saint-Herem leaped from the carriage, ran toward me, and fairly embraced me in his joy to find me again after so long a separation. I was dressed like a poor devil of a notary student, as I am; with my maroon redingote, my black trousers and laced shoes. You must admit that many *lions of society* would have shrunk from the public recognition of a fellow as shabbily dressed as your humble servant. Florestan was so delighted to see me, however, that he paid no heed to my clothes. As for me, I was very happy and almost ashamed of this proof of friendship; for we presented such a contrast that everybody stared at us. Noticing the attention we attracted, my friend asked me where I was going and proposed to take me to my office, saying it would give us more time to talk. 'What,' I protested, 'enter your beautiful carriage with my umbrella, my shabby

coat and coarse shoes!' Florestan shrugged his shoulders, took me by the arm, and led me to the carriage in spite of my remonstrances; and when he left me at the office he made me promise to call on him at his apartments."

"Bah!" ejaculated the old man contemptuously; "it was merely the result of a first impulse. I always distrust people who make extravagant displays; and, besides, you are not in a position to mix with *society lions*."

"And yet I had to keep my word and breakfast with him one Sunday. He received me like a prince and welcomed me like a friend. Shortly afterward, however, he left Paris, and I have not seen him since."

"How strange that you never told me of this breakfast, Louis!"

"I feared that in your tender solicitude for me you might imagine that the sight of Florestan's luxury was capable of turning my head and disgust me with my poor condition. The suspicion I knew would grieve you, and I therefore resolved to conceal the fact that once in my life I had breakfasted in the style of a Sardanapalus or a Lucullus!"

"I understand the delicacy of your conduct, and am deeply touched by it, my boy," said the old man with emotion; "it is another proof of your goodness and generosity of heart. But listen to me, my son, for it is to your kind heart and affection for me that I address myself."

"What is it?"

"It is something very grave and serious; not only for you, but for me also."

The old man's expression was so solemn as he uttered the last words, that the son looked up in surprise.

There was a knock at the door at that moment, and the concierge entered, saying, "Here is a letter for you, Monsieur Louis."

"Very well," said the young man, taking the letter absent-mindedly, his whole attention centered on the grave subject just announced by his father.

"If you should go out this evening, Monsieur Louis," added the man, as he moved away, "don't forget to stop at my lodge; I have something to say to you."

"Very well," replied Louis carelessly, as the man vanished.

Old Richard had recognized Mariette's letter at a first glance, and for a moment he was tempted to allow Louis to read it at once; but on further reflection he resolved to delay the blow.

"My dear boy," he remarked, "you will have plenty of time to read your letter later, and I want you to listen to me just now, for the subject is of the highest importance to us both."

"I am at your service, father," replied Louis, laying the letter on the table.

CHAPTER VI.

"As I have already said," observed old Richard, after a moment of silence, "I shall appeal to your kind heart and affection for me."

"You have but to speak, then, my father," rejoined the young man dutifully.

"You declared a few moments ago that if you sometimes dreamed of a more luxurious existence, it was not for yourself, being entirely satisfied with your humble condition, but for me."

"And I repeat it!"

"Well, my child, the realization of your wish depends on yourself only."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen to me. Reverses of fortune, which closely followed your mother's death, while you were still a child, robbed me of nearly all I possessed, leaving me barely enough to provide for your education. When this was all

spent I was forced to open a bureau as public scribe — "

"True, my good, kind father," said the young man, with emotion; "and seeing with what courage and resignation you endured ill-fortune, my affection and veneration for you augmented to a degree that falls little short of worship."

"This ill-fortune may pursue us, my child; I am growing old, my sight is dimmed, and I foresee the sad day when it shall become impossible for me to earn our daily bread."

"My father, rely on — "

"On you? You will do your best, I know, but your own future is precarious. You shall never be more than first or second clerk, for it requires money to buy out a notary's office, and I am poor."

"Don't be alarmed, I shall always earn enough for both."

"You are counting without illness or the force of events. How many unexpected circumstances may reduce you to idleness for months! And then how should we live?"

"But, my dear father, if we poor people

anticipated all the trouble we may be threatened with, we should certainly lose courage. Let us close our eyes to the future, and think of the present only. Thank God! there is nothing to frighten us in that."

"When the future is threatening, it is assuredly wiser to turn the eyes away; but when it may be happy and smiling, it is better to face it!"

"I don't deny that."

"Well, I repeat it, our future lies in your hands; it depends entirely on you to make it happy and assured."

"Then it is done. Only tell me how?"

"I shall astonish you greatly. That poor M. Ramon, with whom you have just spent a few days and whom you judge so harshly, is an old friend of mine."

"He, your friend?"

"Your visit to Dreux was arranged beforehand between us."

"But those deeds —"

"Your employer obligingly consented to aid us in our little ruse, by entrusting you with valueless papers."

"But what was your purpose?"

"Ramon wanted to observe and study your character without your knowledge, and he assures me he is quite enchanted with you. I received a long letter from him this morning, in which he speaks of you in the highest terms."

"I regret my inability to return the compliment; but why should it matter to me whether he thinks well or ill of me?"

"It matters very much, indeed, my boy; for the happy future of which I spoke depends entirely on Ramon's opinion of you."

"This is an enigma to me."

"Although not exactly rich, Ramon possesses a modest fortune, augmented each day by his economies."

"Humph! I believe that. But what you charitably term economy is sordid avarice, and nothing else."

"Call it what you will; we shall not bandy words about it. Owing to this avarice, however, Ramon will leave a snug fortune after him — I say after him, because he gives nothing away during his life-time."

"I am not surprised at that. But I really cannot understand what you are leading to, father!"

"I feel some hesitation in pursuing; for however false and unjust first impressions may be, they are exceedingly tenacious — and you judged Mademoiselle Ramon so severely —"

"*Red-nose!* Say rather that I was very indulgent!"

"You will overcome these prejudices, I am sure. Believe me, Mademoiselle Ramon is one of those persons who improve on better acquaintance. She is a woman of firm character and exemplary virtues. What more can be desired in the mother of a family?"

"The mother of a family!" gasped Louis, who until now had not suspected the danger that threatened him, but was beginning to conceive a vague fear. "The mother of a family!" he repeated in dismay, "and what matters it to me whether Mademoiselle Ramon is or is not fitted to become a good mother?"

"It matters more to you than to anyone else."

"To me?"

"Certainly."

"And why, pray?"

"Because my most cherished, and only desire is, to see you marry Mademoiselle Ramon," declared the old man, resolutely.

"Marry — Mademoiselle Ramon!" cried Louis, aghast, shrinking back in his chair as if the red-nosed spinster had suddenly appeared before him. "I — marry? —"

"Yes, my child," rejoined old Richard, in his most affectionate tone, "marry Mademoiselle Ramon, and our future is assured. We shall live at Dreux; Ramon's house is sufficiently large for us all. He gives his daughter no dowry; but we shall live in his home, and his influence will obtain a position for you. At the death of your father-in-law, you will inherit a snug fortune — Louis, my beloved son," concluded the old man, beseechingly, grasping the young man's hands in his, "consent to this marriage and you will make me the happiest man in the world; for I can then die without anxiety for your future."

"Ah! my father, you don't realize what you ask!" rejoined Louis reproachfully.

"You may say that you feel no love for Mademoiselle Ramon, but mutual esteem is sufficient in marriage; and you must admit that she is deserving of that esteem. As to her father, I can understand that you may have been shocked at what you term *his avarice;* but this will seem less odious to you when you reflect that you shall one day enjoy the benefits of this economy. At heart, Ramon is an excellent man. His only ambition is to leave a small fortune to his daughter and her husband; and to attain this aim, he practices the strictest economy. Do you call that a crime? Come, my child, give me one word of hope!"

"Father," said the young man, in a constrained voice, "it grieves me to disappoint you in your projects, but what you ask is impossible."

"Louis, can you really answer thus, when I appeal to your affection for me?"

"To begin with, this marriage will bring you no personal advantage; you think of me only."

"What! do you call it no advantage to live in his house without spending a sou? I tell

you it is all arranged; he is to board us gratuitously, instead of giving his daughter a dowry."

"Father, as long as there remains a drop of blood in my veins, you shall receive charity from no one! I have already begged you many times to give up your occupation, pledging myself to provide for both —"

"But, if you were taken ill, my child, I should be forced to seek admittance into the alms-house!"

"I shall not be ill, and you will want for nothing; but if I had the misfortune to be that detestable creature's husband, I should die of grief."

"You cannot be serious, my son."

"Perfectly serious, father. In your blind affection for me you sought to contract an advantageous union, and I am deeply grateful for your kind solicitude — but let us dismiss the subject; as I have already said, this marriage is impossible."

"Louis!"

"I shall always feel an invincible aversion toward Mademoiselle Ramon; and besides, I

love a young girl, and she alone shall be my wife."

"Ah! my son, I believed I enjoyed your full confidence, and yet you formed this grave resolution without consulting me!"

"I was silent on the subject because the young girl and myself agreed to wait a whole year before speaking of marriage, that we might be sure we had not mistaken a passing fancy for a real passion. Thank heaven! our love has resisted all trials. The time of probation expires this very day, and to-morrow we shall fix the wedding day. The young girl I love is as poor as ourselves, but she possesses the noblest heart in the world. Never will you find a more devoted daughter, and I shall double in zeal and energy to make life agreeable to you. Believe me, nothing is more painful to me than to disagree with you, and I beg you to spare me the pain of another refusal. Do not insist on this union, for I shall never resign myself to it, and I swear by my affection for you that I shall have no other wife than Mariette Moreau."

The young man uttered these last words so

firmly that the father decided not to insist at that moment, but merely said in a grieved tone:

"I cannot believe, Louis, that all the reasons I have pleaded in favor of this marriage can be without value in your eyes. I have more confidence in your heart than you seem to have yourself, and I am sure that reflection will bring you to a wiser decision."

"I shall not change my mind."

"I shall insist no further on the subject, but leave you to your reflections. I give you twenty-four hours to come to a definite resolution. Until then, I shall not say a word of this marriage, and I beg of you, on your side, not to trouble me with your love affairs."

"Very well, father; but I assure you that delay —"

"Not a word more on the subject," interrupted the old man, rising.

As he silently paced the room, he cast furtive glances on his son, who was thoughtfully gazing at the letter before him, with his head leaning on his hands, and his elbows supported by the table.

CHAPTER VII.

Having contemplated the letter in silence for some time, without recognizing the writing, Louis mechanically tore it open, while old Richard still continued his tireless pacing, closely observing his every movement.

Suddenly he saw him turn ghastly pale, brush his hand over his brow, as if to assure himself he was not the victim of an illusion, then read the letter once more, with ever-growing anguish expressed on his features.

The letter, written that morning by old Richard, in a disguised hand, ran as follows:

"Monsieur Louis:

"I take advantage of your absence to make a confession which I have postponed for two whole months, because I feared to cause you grief. We must renounce our projects of marriage and never see each other again.

"I cannot explain the cause of this change; but, believe me, my resolution is well taken.

If I have waited until this day, the *sixth of May*, to tell you this, it was because I wanted ample time for reflection before announcing my determination.

"Farewell, Monsieur Louis; do not try to see me; it would be useless and cause us needless pain. If, on the contrary, you forget me entirely and make no attempt to see me, my happiness, as well as that of my god-mother will be assured.

"It is therefore in the name of our happiness and tranquillity that I ask you not to seek me.

"You possess such a kind heart that I am sure you will make no attempt to grieve me, by insisting on an explanation. I swear that all is over between us and that I love you as a friend only. MARIETTE MOREAU."

"P. S. Instead of sending this letter to Dreux, as you instructed me to do, I address it to Paris, that you may find it on your return. Augustine has gone to the country, so another person writes this for me.

"I have forgotten to say that my god-mother's condition is still the same."

The reading of this letter plunged Louis into a hopeless stupor. The ingenuity of the

style, the correctness of details, the emphasis on the date, all convinced him that the lines must have been dictated by Mariette. Having vainly tried to understand the cause of this abrupt rupture, he felt his heart invaded with mingled grief, anger, resentment, and a deep sentiment of wounded pride.

"Indeed, I shall never attempt to see her again," he murmured, unconscious that he spoke aloud. "She has no need to insist on that point with so much obstinacy!"

These words were a relief to the old man, who was closely watching the effects of his stratagem, while apparently absorbed in his own reflections.

But grief soon took the ascendancy over anger in the young man's heart, and his love re-awakened more tender and more passionate than ever; he tried to recall the most trifling details of his last interview with Mariette, questioned his memory in regard to the last few months of their friendship, but could find no trace of growing coldness in their relations. The young girl, on the contrary had never seemed more loving, more devoted, or more

impatient to unite her life to his. And all these appearances had lied; Mariette was a monster of deceit—she whom he had always believed so pure and candid!

No, he could not accept this in silence! He could no longer endure such anguish, without making one effort to unveil the mystery that surrounded Mariette's conduct! The atmosphere of the room stifled him, and he resolved to seek the girl at once and force an explanation from her lips, even at the risk of prejudicing his cause with Mariette's godmother, who was also in ignorance of their love.

Alarmed at the varied emotions reflected on his son's face, old Richard thought it time to interfere.

"My dear Louis," he said, closely scrutinizing the young man's troubled face, "I believe we had better start for Dreux early tomorrow morning, thereby anticipating Ramon's visit to us by twenty-four hours."

"Father!" began Louis, in protestation.

"It will not compromise you, in the least, my son, and if you are resolved to deny

me the dearest wish of my life, all I ask, as a last satisfaction, is to spend a few days with Ramon and his daughter. You shall then be free to act as you please." Then seeing Louis take up his hat, he asked anxiously: "Where are you going?"

"My head aches, and I am going out for a whiff of fresh air," replied the young man.

"In mercy don't go out, my boy!" cried the old man, with growing alarm. "You look gloomy and out of sorts since you read that letter. Really, you frighten me!"

"You are mistaken. The letter was absolutely insignificant, I assure you," returned Louis, closing the door behind him.

As he was rushing out, however, the concierge hailed him and invited him to enter the lodge.

"What is it?" asked Louis, struck by the man's mysterious air.

"Here is a card left for you by a decorated gentleman," explained the concierge. "He came in an elegant carriage, and said this was urgent."

Taking the card, Louis approached the light and read:

"*Commander de La Miraudière,*

"*17 Rue du Mont-Blanc.*

"*Will expect M. Louis Richard at my home, between nine and ten o'clock to-morrow morning, to communicate something of grave importance, which admits of no delay.*"

"Commander de La Miraudière? I never heard the name," said Louis, gazing curiously at the card; then, as he mechanically turned it over, his eyes caught sight of these words in pencil:

"*Mariette Moreau, with Madame Lacombe, Rue des Prêtres-Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois.*"

The commander had noted Mariette's address on the back of his card, and unconsciously used the same in writing to Louis to request an interview.

Much astonished and perplexed, the young man vainly asked himself what relation could exist between this stranger, whose card he held, and Mariette.

"Did the gentleman leave any other mes-

sage?" he asked the concierge. "Did he say anything?"

"Nothing, except that I was to give you the card without your father's knowledge."

"Strange," murmured the young man.

"He even gave me forty sous, to make sure I would do the errand."

"Was he young or old?"

"A very handsome man, wearing the ribbon, with a mustache and side-whiskers black as ink, and dressed like a prince, not counting his elegant cabriolet."

Louis went out more perplexed than ever. This new incident redoubled his anguish; by dint of seeking Mariette's motive for this abrupt rupture, he was beginning to feel the sharp pangs of jealousy. Once under this influence, the wildest suspicions and most chimerical fears assumed the appearance of reality to his eyes; and he finally asked himself if this stranger might not be a rival. How else was he to explain Mariette's relations with a young and handsome young man?

In her letter to him, Mariette begged him not to seek her, as it might compromise her

own and her god-mother's happiness. He well knew the wretched position of the two women, and Mariette had often confided to him the trials she was forced to endure through her god-mother's gloomy and harsh character. A horrible thought now flashed through his head. Had not Mariette, perhaps, been driven by misery and the threats of her god-mother to listen to the brilliant propositions of this man, whose card he now held in his hand? But, in that case, why should this stranger request an interview? The mystery seemed as impenetrable as ever.

Once launched in the dizzy path of jealousy, lovers invariably give full sway to their imaginations and entertain the wildest ideas. Louis was no exception to the rule. In supposing himself supplanted by a rival, he found the key to what seemed inexplicable in Mariette's letter and in her conduct. He therefore tenaciously clung to the belief of her infidelity, longing for the moment when he might demand an explanation from this audacious commander.

He now abandoned his first resolution of

seeing Mariette, and retraced his steps homeward in a state of deep agitation and painful excitement. It was midnight when he again entered their dreary room. His father was anxiously waiting for him; but one glance at his son's gloomy countenance reassured the old man. Feeling certain that the lovers had not met and that his stratagem was still undiscovered, he again proposed a visit to Dreux on the following day; but Louis threw himself dejectedly on his bed, declaring he must have time for reflection before taking such a grave step.

After a night of sleepless agony, the young man rose at dawn and quietly slipped out of the room, glad to escape his father's questioning for a few hours. With his mind tortured by anxiety and misgivings, he turned toward the boulevard to await the hour fixed for his interview with Commander de La Miraudière.

CHAPTER VIII.

Enveloped in a magnificent dressing gown, his feet encased in embroidered slippers, and a fragrant cigar between his lips, Commander de La Miraudière was quietly seated at his desk, with a stack of notes and papers before him, when a servant entered and announced: "M. Richard."

"Usher M. Richard into the drawing-room, and beg him to wait a moment," he said, rising quickly. "You may bring him in when I ring."

The servant withdrew, while his master opened a drawer in the safe near by, took out twenty-five notes of a thousand francs each, and, placing them beside a sheet of stamped paper used in making out deeds, rang the bell.

Louis Richard entered, looking gloomy and confused. His heart throbbed violently at the thought that he was perhaps standing in the presence of a happy rival, and like all sincere

and candid lovers, he greatly exaggerated the advantages possessed by the man whom he believed had supplanted him in the heart of the woman he loved. This Commander de La Miraudière, draped in his superb damask gown, and occupying magnificent apartments, seemed a most formidable rival, indeed, to poor, modest Louis Richard.

"Have I the honor of addressing Monsieur Louis Richard?" said M. de La Miraudière, with his most gracious smile

"Yes, monsieur," replied Louis, simply.

"Only son of M. Richard, public scribe?"

"My father is a public scribe," returned the young man dryly, believing he detected a slight tone of sarcasm in the last words.

"Pardon me for disturbing you," continued the commander, "but it was necessary that I should see you alone. As a private interview seemed impossible in your own home, I requested you to come to me."

"And now that I am here, may I inquire what your wishes are?"

"My only wish is to serve you, my dear

sir, for I would be only too happy to class you as my client."

"I! — your client? But who are you, monsieur?"

"An old soldier, retired commander, twenty campaigns, ten wounds, and a business man, to while away the hours. I hob-nob with the big capitalists, and frequently serve as intermediary between them and the sons of good families."

"Really, I fail to see what service you can render me."

"What service, my young friend! — permit an old trooper to give you that title — you ask what service I can render you, a poor notary clerk! You vegetate, you share a wretched attic room with your father, and you are dressed — heaven knows how!"

"Monsieur!" cried Louis, flushing with indignation.

"My dear young friend, these are facts which I state with regret, with indignation, almost. The devil! a young man like you should spend twenty-five to thirty thousand

francs per annum, have horses and mistresses, and enjoy the luxuries of life!"

"Is this a jest, monsieur?" asked Louis, haughtily. "If so, I warn you that I am not in the humor to endure it."

"Being an old soldier, my young friend, I have already proved my bravery and valor on scores of occasions," remarked M. de La Miraudière, boastfully, "and I can therefore allow your hasty words to pass unnoticed. Moreover, I admit that what I have said must sound very extraordinary to you."

"Most extraordinary, indeed!"

"Here is something that will convince you that I am speaking seriously, my young friend," went on the braggart, designating the bills before him. "Here are twenty-five thousand francs, which I will be most happy to place at your disposition, that you may establish yourself as a young man of good family; furthermore, you may draw on me for two thousand five hundred francs each month. I offer you these advances for five years; we shall count up later."

Louis was gazing at him in consternation, unable to believe his senses.

"You make that offer to me?" he queried, rousing himself from his stupefaction.

"Yes, and I am most happy to make it."

"To me?—Louis Richard?"

"To you, Louis Richard."

"Richard is a common name, monsieur; you must take me for some one else."

"Not at all! I know whom I am addressing; Louis Desiré Richard, only son of Alexander Timoleon Benedict Richard, aged sixty-seven years, born at Brie-Comte-Robert, domiciled at 23 Rue de Grenelle, public scribe by profession. As you see, there is no error, my young friend."

"If you know my family so well, monsieur, you must be aware that my poverty does not permit me to contract such a loan."

"Your poverty?—poor boy!"

"But—"

"This is abominable, a veritable outrage!" cried the business man in a tone of righteous indignation; "to bring up a young man in such error! to condemn him to spend the

brightest years of his life in slavery! to reduce him to a shabby coat, blue stockings and laced shoes! But, happily—there is a Providence, and that Providence you see in me, my young friend. It appears to you under the features of Commander de La Miraudière!"

"I am weary of this by-play, monsieur," returned Louis, impatiently. "Pray explain yourself clearly, or I shall go."

"Very well!—You believe your father to be almost in want, do you not?"

"I am not ashamed of our poverty—"

"Oh! candid young man!"

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, and you will then bless me as your saviour forever after."

Opening a voluminous register, he read the following statement:

"Record of personal property of Alexandre Timoleon Benedict Richard (information taken by Credit Committee of the Bank of France, May 1, 18—.)

Three thousand, nine hundred and twenty shares in the Bank of France (actual value)	924,300 frs.
Bonds of the Mont-de-Piété	875,250 frs.
Deposit in Bank of France	259,130 frs.
Total	2,058,680 frs."

"As you see, my innocent young friend," continued the pompous commander, "the known personal property of your esteemed and honorable father amounts to two millions, fifty-eight thousand, six hundred and eighty francs, according to official statistics. But everything leads us to believe that, like all misers, your worthy father has a good round lump of gold hidden somewhere. But even placing things at their lowest, you see that the author of your being possesses over two millions, at least. As his income is about a hundred thousand *livres* per annum, and he does not spend twelve hundred francs, you shall enjoy a very large fortune some day; you can, therefore, feel no astonishment at my offer."

This revelation paralyzed the young man with amazement. A thousand confused thoughts struggled in his mind, and he stared at his companion stupidly, unable to utter a word.

"You are quite dazed, my young friend," pursued the commander. "I suppose you imagine you must be dreaming!"

"Indeed, I scarcely know whether to be-

lieve you or not," said Louis, still sadly bewildered.

"Do as Saint Thomas did, my young friend: touch these twenty-five thousand franc notes; it will give you faith. The capitalists whom I represent, are not men who throw away money; and here, I may add, that they make these advances at the rate of *eight per cent.* the commission for my obliging services being *seven per cent.* more. You are too much of a gentleman to bargain over such trifles; besides, both capital and interest will barely reach half your father's yearly income. Even while spending at the rate of fifty thousand francs per annum, you will be economizing; yet, it will enable you to await the supreme hour patiently—I mean the hour when the old man —you understand! Moreover, as the said old man might be astonished at your high way of living, I have thought of a most ingenious explanation. You will hold a ticket in a lottery and presumably draw the capital prize, a diamond which you will sell for eight or nine thouaand francs. This you will be supposed to have entrusted to a friend who,

in his turn, invested the money in a magnificent enterprise, paying three hundred per cent. per annum. Thanks to this stratagem, you can spend your twenty-five to thirty thousand francs right under the paternal nose without awakening any suspicions. Now, young man, was I presumptuous in affecting providential airs toward you? But why this gloom and silence? I, who expected you to burst with delight, to shout with joy, to cut capers, and give vent to many other manifestations totally excusable in the first moments of rejoicing over your sudden transformation from a poor notary clerk into a millionaire! Why don't you answer me? Heavens! I fear his sudden happiness has bereft him of his senses!"

This revelation, which would doubtless have thrown anyone else into a state of delirious joy, caused the most painful emotion to Louis Richard. To begin with, the long dissimulation and distrust shown by his father in leaving him in ignorance of his wealth, wounded him to the heart; and then — this was the most cruel thought to him — he remem-

bered that he could never share these riches with Mariette; that by her heartless desertion she had deprived him of the pleasure of changing her wretched, joyless existence into a life of luxury and happiness.

This reflection revived his bitter grief; and, forgetting everything but the explanation he had sworn to demand from this man before him, he drew the offending visiting card from his pocket, saying haughtily:

"You left this card for me at my home, monsieur?"

"Certainly, my young friend, but—"

"Can you explain, monsieur, how the name and address of Mademoiselle Mariette Moreau came to be scribbled on it?" continued Louis, glaring at him.

"What!" exclaimed the amazed commander.

"I wish to know how Mademoiselle Mariette Moreau's address comes to be on this card!" repeated Louis coldly.

"The devil! he must have lost his senses!" said the usurer. "My dear young fellow, I speak to you of millions, of thirty thousand

francs yearly, and you answer by speaking of — grisettes!"

"When I ask a question, monsieur," thundered Louis, "I expect a reply!"

"And you assume such a tone with me, my young friend!"

"If my tone does not suit you, I cannot help it."

"The deuce, my young fellow!" cried the usurer, fiercely. "But, bah!" he added, twirling his black moustache caressingly between his fingers, "I have proved my bravery scores of times — I, an old soldier, perforated with bullets, can pass such words unnoticed. My dear client, the name and address of that little girl were found on my card, because I wrote them down that I might not forget where to find her."

"You know Mademoiselle Mariette then?"

"Most assuredly!"

"You court her?"

"Once in a while."

"And you hope? —'

"Much."

"Monsieur, I forbid you to ever set foot in her home again!"

"So I have found a rival!" said the usurer to himself. "Ah! I now understand the girl's refusal. I must sound him, drive him to jealousy, push him into a trap. The girl is worth having, and I must check this passionate youth."

"My dear sir," he asked aloud, "when I am forbidden to do a thing, I consider it my first duty to do that very thing."

"That remains to be seen!"

"Listen, young man; I have fought fifty-seven duels, and can therefore dispense with the fifty-eighth. I prefer to reason with you. Allow me one question: You have just returned from a journey?"

"I have."

"You were absent several days, and have not seen Mariette since your return?"

"But —"

"My dear young friend, you only share the lot of many others. Mariette knows nothing of your wealth; so when I offered her enough to turn the head of any starved working girl,

she accepted with delight. Her godmother, who is also half starved, has a natural inclination for the luxuries of this life, and as the absent ones are always in the wrong — you understand — "

"Oh, my God! is it true then!" moaned Louis piteously, his wrath giving way to hopeless despair.

"Had I known I was entering in competition with a future client I would have abandoned the game," resumed the usurer; "but it is too late now. Besides, my young friend, there is nothing to cry about. This girl was much too inexperienced for you; you would have had to form her, while there are many charming women ready to drop in your arms. I would particularly recommend a certain Madame de Saint-Hildebrande — "

"Wretch!" cried Louis indignantly, grasping him by the collar and shaking him vigorously. "You miserable scoundrel!"

"Sir, you will give me satisfaction for this —!" gasped the enraged commander.

The door opened abruptly and the two adversaries turned their heads simultaneously as

"YOU MISERABLE SCOUNDREL!"

a gay burst of laughter rang through the room.

"Saint-Herem!" exclaimed Louis, recognizing his old friend.

"You here!" cried Florestan de Saint-Herem, grasping the young man's hand and gazing curiously into his pale face.

"May the devil take him for coming in at this moment!" muttered the usurer between his clenched teeth, as he readjusted the collar of his dressing-gown.

CHAPTER IX.

Florestan de Saint-Herem was a man of thirty, at the most, with handsome features and a commanding, elegant figure. His physiognomy expressed both intelligence and wit, but often wore a mask of supercilious impertinence when addressing persons of the same stamp as the usurer.

The first moment of surprise and greeting over, the actors in the foregoing scene resumed their antagonistic attitude toward each other. Louis, still pale with indignation, glared at his adversary fiercely, while the latter faced him defiantly.

"To dare raise a hand on me! — an old soldier!" cried the commander, advancing threateningly toward Louis. "This will not pass unpunished, Monsieur Richard!"

"As you wish, Monsieur de La Miraudière," returned Louis.

"Monsieur de La Miraudière!" repeated

Florestan, with a sarcastic laugh. "What! do you take this fellow seriously, my good Louis? Do you believe in his military title, his cross, his campaigns, his wounds, his duels, and his sonorous name of de La Miraudière?"

"Your jests are entirely out of place!" cried the usurer, flushing angrily, "and I will not endure them in my own house, Monsieur de Saint-Herem!—Indeed I will not, my dear fellow."

"His name is Jérome Porquin, my dear Louis," sneered Saint-Herem, "and it seems admirably chosen, does it not?" Then, turning to the crushed usurer, he added in a tone that admitted of no retort: "Monsieur Porquin, this is the second time I am forced to forbid you to address me as "*your dear fellow.*" With me it is a different matter; I have bought and paid for the right of calling you my *dear*, my enormously *dear*, my too *dear* Monsieur Porquin, for you have swindled me outrageously and cost me a good round sum!"

"Sir, I will not suffer this!" cried the wrathful usurer.

"Whence comes this timid sensitiveness on

the part of M. Porquin?" asked Florestan, derisively. "What has happened? Ah! I see. This *dear* M. Porquin does not enjoy having his lies and vain pretentions unmasked in your presence, Louis. Well, I will tell you who M. de La Miraudière really is. He once served the rations in the army, and in that capacity went to Madrid during the last war. This is the only service he has ever seen, and he was discharged from that for dishonesty. He has never fought a duel for, to begin with, he is too cowardly, and then he knows well that a gentleman would receive a challenge from him with contempt; and if driven to extremities by his insolence, he would simply teach him a lesson with his walking-stick."

"When you stand in need of me you treat me with more delicacy!" sneered the usurer.

"When I need your services I pay for them; and as I know your unscrupulous character, it is my duty to warn M. Richard, whose friend I have the honor to be. You are doubtless trying to entice him into your net."

"Ah! this is the reward I get for my services!" cried M. Porquin, bitterly. "I reveal

a secret of the highest importance to your friend, and —"

"I now understand your object in coming to me," interrupted Louis, dryly. "I owe you no thanks for the service you have rendered me — if it is a service," he concluded sadly

The usurer had no intention of giving up his prey without a struggle, however, and turning to Florestan, with the same ease as if they had been on the most friendly terms, he said conciliatingly:

"M. Louis Richard can tell you what conditions I proposed and under what circumstances I made him this offer; you will then be better able to judge if my demands were exorbitant. Furthermore, if I disturb you in your conversation, gentlemen, you may enter the drawing-room. If M. Richard wishes to consult you on the subject, I shall await his decision here."

"This is the most intelligent phrase you have uttered yet," returned Saint-Herem, taking Louis' arm to lead him into the adjoining room. "And when we get through, I shall tell you the object of my visit. Or, rather, I

will tell you now. I must have two hundred louis this evening. Here are the securities; examine them at your leisure."

Drawing a bundle of papers from his pocket, he tossed them carelessly toward the usurer and left the room with his friend.

The haughty brutality with which Florestan had unmasked Porquin had proved a new blow to Louis Richard. The thought that Mariette had sacrificed him for such a wretch, filled his heart with bitterness and resentment, and, unable to control his emotion longer, he burst into tears the moment he found himself alone with his friend.

"Ah! Florestan, I am unhappy!" he sobbed, as he clasped his companion's hand.

"I have no doubt of it, my poor Louis," said Saint-Herem sympathizingly, "for to place yourself in the clutches of such a rascal as Parquin, is to sell yourself to the devil! But tell me what has happened? You have always been good and industrious, I know, but you may have contracted some debt or committed some slight folly. What may seem enormous to you, may be only a trifle to me.

I shall receive two hundred louis from this Arab to-night; you have but to say the word and they are yours. I can turn to someone else! Two hundred louis ought to cover the debts of a notary clerk — come, must you have more? Then we shall raise more; but in heaven's name don't put yourself in the toils of this scoundrel!"

This generous offer filled Louis' heart with such sweet consolation that for the moment he forgot his sorrows.

"My dear Florestan," he said gratefully, "you cannot imagine how this proof of friendship on your part comforts and consoles me."

"You accept, then?"

"No."

"What?"

"I have no need of your good services. This usurer, who was a total stranger to me, wrote to me requesting an interview; and he offers to lend me more money in one year than I have spent in all my life."

"He offers you that! Why, the rascal never advances a sou without the best securities. People of his stamp consider neither

honor, probity, nor industry; and I was not aware that you had expectations."

"You are mistaken, Florestan; my father is worth over two millions."

"Your father!" exclaimed Saint-Herem in amazement. "Your father rich!"

"This usurer discovered his secret; how, I cannot say."

"And so he offered his services. Well, you may be sure his information is correct, for he advances nothing on doubtful security."

"I believe it," rejoined Louis sadly.

"My dear Louis, one might think you had made some unfortunate discovery. What is it? Are you unhappy? — and why, pray?"

"Ah! my friend, don't scoff at me. I love, and have been deceived."

"You have a rival?"

"And that rival is this wretch!"

"Porquin? — nonsense; what makes you imagine such an absurdity?"

"I had some suspicions, and then he assured me he had been accepted."

"A fine authority, upon my word! He lies, I am sure of it."

"He is rich, Florestan; and the woman I loved and still love in spite of myself, is poor. She has endured the most cruel misery for years."

"The devil!"

"Besides this, she is the only support of a crippled old woman. This man's offers dazzled the poor child; and like so many others, she succumbed through misery. What good is a fortune now, when my only desire was to share it with Mariette?"

"My dear Louis, I know you too well to believe you could have loved a woman unworthy of your affections."

"For a whole year Mariette gave me abundant proofs of a sincere affection; then yesterday, without warning, a letter came announcing the sudden rupture —"

"A woman who loved a poor man like you for a whole year, does not yield to an old rascal like Porquin in one day. I tell you he lies!" And to Louis' great astonishment, Saint-Herem called aloud, "Hi, there! de la Miraudière!"

"Florestan! what are you doing?" remonstrated Louis, as the usurer appeared.

"Monsieur de La Miraudière," observed Saint-Herem, with his habitual supercilious air, "there seems to exist some slight confusion in your mind in regard to a respectable young girl, who, according to you, has been seduced by your wit, your personal charms and excellent manners, still more enchanced by that gold which you so honorably grasp. Now, my worthy commander, will you do me the pleasure to speak the truth? If not, I shall know how to deal with you."

"I deeply regret having jested on a subject which seems to annoy M. Richard," responded Porquin, deeming it better policy to sacrifice a fancy which stood little chance of being gratified, than to run the risk of losing so promising a client as Louis.

"You may perhaps be able to explain how the idea of this jest — which, by the way, I should call a base calumny — entered your head?" pursued Florestan.

"Nothing more simple, monsieur: I saw Mademoiselle Mariette Moreau in the workshop, and was struck with her beauty. I then

procured her address, visited her home, where I found her godmother, and proposed—"

"Enough, sir! enough!" cried Louis indignantly.

"Permit me to add, my dear client," resumed Porquin, imperturbably, "that the said godmother refused my offers point-blank, and that Mademoiselle Mariette indignantly showed me the door. As you see, I am perfectly frank, and hope this sincere avowal will win me the confidence of M. Richard, who will not fail to accept my services. As for you, Monsieur de Saint-Herem, I have examined your securities and will place the two hundred *louis* in your hands this evening—and now that you have learned the conditions I have proposed to your friend, I am sure you must consider them reasonable."

"I don't want your money," cried Louis. "Do you believe me capable of discounting my father's death?"

"But, my dear client, allow me—"

"Come, Florestan, let us go," interrupted Louis, "this room stifles me."

"My dear Porquin," remarked Saint-Herem,

as he followed his friend to the door, "as you see, there are still honest sons and daughters living. I will not say: 'May this serve you as a lesson or an example,' for you are too old a sinner to reform; but I sincerely hope this double disappointment will prove a most disagreeable pill to swallow."

"Ah! my dear friend, you have relieved me of a cruel doubt," said Louis, gratefully, when they had reached the street. "I am now certain that Mariette never lowered herself to this wretch — but the fact still remains that she has broken our engagement."

"Did she tell you so?"

"She has written or, rather, made someone else write."

"Made someone else write?"

"Ah! you will laugh at me — the poor girl I love can neither read nor write."

"What a happy mortal you are! You are spared the lengthy epistles I am forced to endure from a little shop girl whom I have robbed from a jealous banker. I amuse myself by making her the rage, and enjoy the poor creature's ecstasies immensely! It is

so delightful to make others happy. Her grammar is outrageous, however. Ah! my friend, what orthography! it is of the ante-diluvian, innocent style; such as Mother Eve must have used — but if your Mariette cannot write, who knows but her secretary may have misinterpreted her thoughts?"

"With what object?"

"I don't know. But why not have an explanation with her?"

"She has begged me, in the name of her future happiness, not to see her again."

"Well, now that you are a prospective millionaire, I would advise you to see her in the name of that very future happiness."

"You are right, Florestan; I shall see her, and if this cruel mystery can be explained, if I find her as in the past, affectionate and devoted, what bliss shall be mine! Poor child, her life has been one of work and misery; but she will now find comfort and rest, for my father shall consent, and —Ah! my God! —"

"What is it?" asked Florestan, anxiously.

"I have forgotten to tell you that my father wishes me to marry your cousin."

"What cousin?"

"Mademoiselle Ramon."

"You don't mean it?"

"I have just returned from Dreux, where I met her; and I must admit that, even if I were not in love with Mariette, I could never marry such a woman —"

"My uncle must be still wealthy, then, though he announced his ruin many years ago," interrupted Saint-Herem. "It is evident that a marriage with my cousin would be advantageous to you, or your father would never propose it, believe me."

"My father explained our poverty in the same way; he pretended to have lost his money many years ago"

"Ah, my worthy uncle, I knew you to be disagreeable and unendurable!" resumed Florestan; "but I did not believe you capable of such superiority of conception; from this day I esteem and venerate you. I am not your heir, it is true; but the thought of a millionaire uncle is a pleasant one, nevertheless. In moments of trouble we dream of him, we form all sorts of affectionate hypoth-

eses, even revel in thoughts of apoplexy and long for cholera, that Providence of impecunious heirs, which appears like a good fairy, robed in rosy hues."

"My dear Florestan," laughed Louis, "though I wish no one harm, I admit that I would be glad to see your uncle's fortune fall into your hands instead of going to his detestable daughter. You would know how to enjoy the money at least; and, with such wealth, I am sure you would—"

"Contract debts, my dear fellow," interrupted his friend, majestically.

"What! with that immense fortune —"

"I would most assuredly contract debts, I tell you."

"With two or three millions?"

"With ten, or twenty millions! My system is similar to that of the State: the higher the debt of a country, the higher stands her credit; therefore, what is credit?—wealth! This is elementary, not counting that it involves a high question of moral philosophy. But I shall explain my financial and philosophical ideas on a more favorable occasion. Go to

Mariette, and report to me later. As for me, I have promised to take my little shop-girl out on a new saddle-horse which, by the way, cost me an outrageous price. Now don't fail to come or write to me; whatever happens, I want to share your joy or sorrow. But jump in and let me take you there."

"Thank you, I prefer to walk; it will give me time to think over all that has happened and what attitude I should assume toward my father, in view of this singular revelation."

"Good-bye, then, my dear Louis; don't forget that I shall expect you before the day is over," said Saint-Herem, jumping into his brougham, while Louis turned toward Mariette's home.

CHAPTER X.

A sad picture met the young man's eyes, as he paused for a moment on the threshold of the room occupied by Mariette and her godmother. Lying on a thin mattress in a corner of the room was the young girl, seemingly unconscious; her features were of a deathly pallor and painfully contracted, and traces of abundant tears stained her marble cheeks; one hand lay listlessly at her side, while in the other she convulsively clutched the envelope containing the debris of Louis' letter. Kneeling by the bedside, her harsh, sarcastic features softened by an expression of touching grief and cruel anxiety, Mme. Lacombe was supporting Mariette's head with her mutilated arm, while with the other hand she was endeavoring to force a few drops of water through the livid lips.

At the sight of a stranger standing in the doorway, however, her features resumed their

habitual expression of harshness and moroseness.

"What do you want?" she asked roughly. "Why do you come in without rapping at the door? — I don't know you! — who are you?"

Taking no notice of these many questions, Louis rushed to the bedside and threw himself on his knees beside the unconscious girl, crying: "My God! what has happened? — Mariette, Mariette, speak to me!"

"So you are Louis Richard?" exclaimed the old woman, her eyes flashing angrily as she gazed at the young man.

"Yes; but in heaven's name, tell me what has happened to Mariette!"

"You have killed her!"

"I — great heavens!"

"And when she is dead, you will provide for me, I suppose?" sneered Mme. Lacombe.

"Dead! — Mariette dead!" gasped Louis. "It is impossible! — But we must summon a physician, do something — her hands are icy — Mariette! Mariette!" he called wildly. "My God! my God! she does not hear me!"

"And this is all the fault of that letter of

yours, you impudent scoundrel!" interposed the old woman fiercely.

"My letter? — what letter?" he asked in astonishment.

"Ah, yes; you will lie about it and deny the whole thing now, of course! But last night the poor child broke down in despair and confessed the whole thing to me."

"But what did she have to confess?"

"That she loved you and you had deserted her for another — "

'But on the contrary I wrote to Mariette that — "

"You lie!" cried the old woman vehemently. "I tell you she read your letter; there it is now, clutched in her fingers! Heavens! what a flood of tears she shed over that rag! Go out of my sight, you worthless rake! We were very stupid indeed to refuse the good offer made to us. Yet, I told Mariette virtue brought little reward in this world. And now she is dying, and I am out into the street, without fire or shelter, without bread or anything, for everything will go for back rent. Happily," she added, with a grim smile, "I

have still a small measure of charcoal left — and charcoal is the deliverance of poor people from misery."

"My God! this is horrible!" moaned Louis, unable to restrain his tears. "I swear that we are the victims of some terrible mistake, madame — Mariette! Mariette! speak to me! — It is I — Louis!"

"Do you want to kill her on the spot?" cried the exasperated woman, trying to push him away. "If she recovers consciousness, the sight of you will finish her."

"Heaven be praised!" murmured Louis, resisting the woman's efforts and bending over the girl. "See, her hands are relaxing and her eyes opening — Mariette! it is I, Louis! do you hear me?"

The girl's eyes roamed around the room for a moment, then slowly turned on the young man, who still leaned anxiously over her. Soon an expression of joyful surprise spread itself over her pale features and she attempted to raise her head, supporting herself on her elbow.

"Louis!" she murmured, feebly. "Ah! I

thought I would never see you again—" Then as the sad reality returned to her mind, she threw herself in Mme. Lacombe's arms and burst into tears.

"Ah! godmother," she sobbed, "he comes to say farewell — it is all over!"

"There now, didn't I tell you this would finish her!" cried Mme. Lacombe, fiercely. "Go, I say! and never let me see your face again!"

"Mariette! in mercy listen to me!" pleaded Louis. "I did not come to say farewell, but to tell you that I love you more than ever."

"Heavens! can it be true?" murmured the girl, starting up.

"We have been the victims of some error, Mariette," continued the young man. "I have never ceased to love you for a single moment; no, never. During my absence, I had but one thought, one desire; it was to see you again and fix the day of our marriage, as I told you in my letter--"

"Your letter!" interrupted the girl, sadly. "Have you already forgotten what you wrote, Louis? Here — read it."

"He can deny his own writing, of course," growled Mme. Lacombe, as the young man hastily placed the torn pieces together; "and you'll be stupid enough to believe him."

"This is what I wrote, Mariette," said Louis, when he had succeeded in his difficult task.

"My Dear Mariette:

I shall be with you the day following the receipt of this letter. What I have suffered during this short separation proves that I cannot live without you. Thank God, the day of our union is fast approaching. To-morrow is the *sixth of May*, remember. I shall speak to my father the moment I reach home, and I am sure he will not refuse his consent.

"Farewell, then, until day after to-morrow, my darling Mariette. I love you madly, or wisely, rather; for I was wise to seek and find happiness in a heart like yours.

"Yours forever and ever. LOUIS."

"I write these few lines only, because I shall be in Paris almost as soon as my letter; and then, it is always painful to think that other eyes see what I write for you only. Were it not for this, how many things might I not say!"

Mariette was so astounded that she could find no word to say.

"I cannot understand how this letter could have produced such a sad effect on you?" said Louis, much perplexed.

"Is that really what the letter says?" asked the amazed girl.

"Certainly. Here, Madame Lacombe, read it," suggested Louis, placing the fragments before her.

"You know very well that I can't read," replied the old woman, roughly. "How is it that the contrary was told Mariette?"

"Who read it for you, Mariette?" asked Louis.

"The public scribe," she informed him.

"A public scribe!" exclaimed the young man, a fearful suspicion flashing through his mind. "In mercy, explain yourself!"

"There is very little to explain, my dear Louis. I went in search of a public scribe, at the *Charnier des Innocents*, and dictated a letter for you to a very kind old gentleman. He was so kind, indeed, that he only charged me ten *sous*, although he was obliged to write

it twice, having spilt the bottle of ink on the first copy as he was preparing to address it to Dreux. When I reached home again, I found this letter from you; then I went back to the public scribe—for he had shown much interest in me — and he read it for me. According to him, the letter said that we should never meet again; that your father's future happiness and your own depended on our separation, and that —" But she could say no more, and burst into tears.

Louis understood it all, however, from the chance meeting of Mariette with his father, to the stratagem of the latter to deceive them both. This abuse of confidence overwhelmed him with such grief and shame, that he dared not admit the tie of relationship existing between himself and the public scribe, but sought another plausible explanation of this deceit and treachery.

"Notwithstanding his apparent good nature and benevolence, this old rascal must have been trying to amuse himself at your expense, my poor Mariette," said the young man. "He

read you just the contrary of what I had written."

"Oh! how could he be so cruel!" cried the girl, clasping her two hands together. "He appeared so good, and expressed his sympathy so kindly for poor creatures like me, who can neither read nor write."

"One thing is evident, my dear Mariette, he certainly deceived you."

"But did you receive my letter at Dreux?"

"It must have reached that city after I had left it," he said, unwilling to admit that it had been addressed to Paris. "But never mind it now," he added, anxious to drop a conversation which pained him so deeply; "we are happy and —"

"Yes, you are happy enough," put in Mme. Lacombe, "but what about me?"

"What do you mean, godmother?" asked Mariette.

"I mean that I will never consent to such a marriage," she said harshly.

"But my dear madame —" began Louis.

"Tut, tut, tut, soft words won't blind me, young man," she interrupted roughly. "If

you are the son of a public writer, you are as penniless as Mariette; and two miseries united in marriage are worth three single ones. My goddaughter has enough of me to support, without a troop of famished children."

"But, my dear godmother —" protested the girl.

"Don't bother me!" she retorted angrily. "I know your plans; you simply want to rid yourself of me and leave me in the gutter to starve."

"How can you believe such a thing!"cried Mariette, reproachfully, her eyes full of tears.

"Your fears are groundless, I assure you," Louis hastened to say. "I have just discovered that my father is immensely wealthy, but for reasons of his own, he has kept the matter a secret until now."

Mariette gazed at Louis with an air of mingled astonishment and delight at this unexpected information. Then she smiled through her tears and said, with a shade of defiance in her gentle voice: "You see, godmother, that the picture is not as dark as you painted it;

we are quite able to take care of you as well as ourselves."

"You are quite ready to fall into the trap, of course," rejoined the old woman, with a sarcastic laugh.

"But, godmother — "

"Don't you see that he is inventing those lies to obtain my consent to your marriage — "

"Madame, I swear — "

"And I tell you there is no truth in it; or, if you are rich, you don't want Mariette. A rich man would never be stupid enough to marry a poor girl who can neither read nor write."

"You are mistaken," said Louis, with dignity; "the son of a rich man does not break the word given in his days of poverty, when his life's happiness depends on that word — "

"Bah! mere phrases and words!" interrupted the woman sharply. "Rich or poor, you shall never have Mariette, until you have assured me a living. I don't ask much; only six hundred francs a year; but I must have it in money, with a contract deposited in the hands of a reliable notary."

"Ah! godmother, why should you distrust Louis so?" protested Mariette tearfully.

"My dear child, I know all about these fine promises," declared Mme. Lacombe. "He will promise anything beforehand; then, when he is sure of you, out goes the old cripple. With you, Mariette, I have nothing to fret about. I may be a heavy burden, but you are a good girl and stand in awe of me. Once married, however, you will both defy me and throw me out of the house. What will become of me, then? Is it my fault if I am a cripple? No! no! I tell you there shall be no marriage unless an income of six hundred francs is placed in the hands of a notary!"

While giving away to these bitter recriminations, the poor creature rocked to and fro, looking furtively at the two young people and watching the effect of her words.

"Poor Mariette," thought Louis, "how she must have suffered! To think of so much affection and devotion rewarded with so much ingratitude!"

"Madame," he said aloud, when she had ceased speaking, "you may rest assured that

neither Mariette nor myself will ever forget that you have been as a mother to her; and you shall always be treated with the consideration that you deserve — I swear it."

"Thank you, Louis!" cried the girl gratefully; "I am glad to see that you share my sentiments for my poor godmother, who has indeed been as a mother to me."

"Don't you see that he is laughing at us!" exclaimed the old woman harshly. "He has no intention of marrying you and giving me a pension, I can tell you. If he is really rich, he will cajole you and entice you into a trap; then some fine morning, you will hear of his marriage with another woman — go, I say, and never set foot in this house again!"

"Madame," said Louis, "I shall come with my father to beg the honor of Mariette's hand in marriage, and will at the same time inform you of the advantages I shall be able to give you."

"Yes, yes, those fine propositions will come when I am in my grave," she muttered, as she climbed into her bed and turned her face to the wall.

"It shall be no later than to-morrow," declared Louis. "Good-bye, Mariette. I shall call with my father to-morrow."

"Can it really be true that, after so much sorrow, we should at last know happiness — happiness forever," murmured the young girl, as Louis clasped her hand tenderly in his.

"Will you ever get done? you are driving me wild with your happiness!" came sharply from the bed. "Go, and leave me in peace! — and don't you dare to move from the room, Mariette! You are dying to go down with that gay deceiver, I know; but when I say *no*, I mean *no!*"

The young couple exchanged one last loving glance and, with a whispered: "Good-bye, my darling," Louis was gone, while Mariette returned slowly to the bedside of her godmother.

CHAPTER XI.

Louis at once proceeded to his father's business place, anxious to get over the inevitable explanation which had become necessary between them. But to his great astonishment and alarm, he found the door and shutters still closed, and was informed by the neighbors that the old man had not made his appearance that day. This break in his regular habits seemed so unusual and inexplicable, that the young man felt a vague uneasiness invading him as he hurried toward home, and all sorts of wild conjectures flashed through his mind. He soon reached the Rue de Grenelle, however, and was running up the first flight of stairs when the concierge called him from his door.

"Monsieur Louis," he said, "your father went out a couple of hours ago and left a letter for you. I was to take it to your office if you did not return before two o'clock."

The young man grasped the letter and tore it open. It ran thus:

"My dear child:

"I have just received a few lines from my friend Ramon, informing me that he and his daughter will arrive in Paris to-day.

"As he has never traveled in a railway train and anticipates much pleasure in that mode of conveyance, he will stop at Versailles, where he begs us to meet him. We shall visit the palace, and return together by the last train.

"I shall wait for you at the Hotel du Reservoir; but if you are late, you can join us at the palace. Remember, that this interview with Mademoiselle Ramon will compromise you in no way. My only desire is that you should take advantage of this opportunity to study that young person's character and see the injustice of your groundless prejudices. You will moreover understand that, whatever may be your projects, it would be most ungracious on your part to fail at a rendezvous given by one of my oldest and dearest friends.

"Your father, who loves you deeply, and whose sole desire is your happiness.

"A. RICHARD."

Notwithstanding his habitual deference to the wishes of his father, Louis thought it unnecessary to go to Versailles and face Mademoiselle Ramon a second time; so he hastened to his employer's office instead, and resumed his usual work, undeterred by the astounding revelation of his father's wealth. Owing to the numerous distractions caused by the various events of the day, however, it was late when he finished his day's task and put away his papers.

He had just closed his desk and was taking his hat from its accustomed peg, when one of his comrades burst into the room and cried excitedly: "My God! what a terrible thing!"

"What is it," asked the clerks in chorus.

"I have just met a friend on his way back from the Versailles station —"

"Versailles station!" echoed Louis, with a sudden start. "Well, what has happened?"

"A frightful accident!"

"Great Heavens!" cried Louis, turning deathly pale. "But go on."

"The return train to Paris ran off the track, throwing the cars in a heap; and it is reported

that all the passengers have either been crushed or burnt to death, and — "

But Louis stopped to hear no more. Rushing out, bareheaded as he was, he dashed down the street to the first corner, where he leaped into a cab, crying: "Twenty francs if you take me to the Versailles station at breakneck speed — and from there somewhere else — I don't know where; but in mercy, go! "

" Which side of the river, monsieur," asked the coachman, as he lashed his horse.

" What do you mean? "

" There are two stations. One on the right, the other on the left bank."

" I want to go where that terrible accident occurred."

"This is the first I hear of it, monsieur."

Louis was forced to return to the office for information; but he found the place already deserted, and returned to the cab in despair.

" I have just learned it was on the left bank," the coachman informed him from his seat.

" To the left bank then! " he ordered, sinking back on the cushions with a moan.

There he learned that the sad news was unfortunately but too true, and was directed how to reach the scene of the accident.

It was nightfall when he finally reached Bas-Meudon; and, guided by the flames of the burning debris, he soon found himself on the sinister spot, where he spent the night in a fruitless search for the charred remains of his father among the mass of crushed and burnt flesh piled on the roadside or pinioned in the wreck. Worn out in body and spirits, he returned to Paris at dawn, hoping his father might have been one of the small number that had escaped with slight injuries.

"Has my father returned?" were his first words to the concierge.

"No, monsieur Louis," replied the man.

"There is no doubt possible then — he perished in the accident," he moaned, sinking into a chair and bursting into sobs.

In a few moments he had recovered his self-possession however; and, without stopping to hear the concierge's words of condolence, he slowly ascended to the fifth landing and entered the dreary room. At sight of this

gloomy home, so long shared with his beloved father, the young man's grief again became uncontrollable; and, throwing himself on the bed, he buried his face in his hands and gave free scope to his overwhelming sorrow.

He had sobbed thus for half an hour, absorbed wholly in his bitter despair, when he was startled by a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of some one into the room.

"What is it?" asked Louis, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"I am sorry to disturb you at such a time, Monsieur Louis," said the concierge timidly, "but the coachman —"

"What coachman?" questioned the young man in surprise, having entirely forgotten the cab in his grief.

"Why, the coachman you retained all night. It seems you promised him twenty extra francs if he would lash his horse to the utmost speed. This, with his night's run, comes to forty-nine francs, and he claims his money."

"Well, give him the money and tell him to go!" rejoined Louis impatiently.

"But, forty-nine francs is an enormous sum, Monsieur Louis; and I can't pay it."

"My God! what shall I do!" cried the young man, recalled to the material interests of life by this request. "I have no money!"

"Then why in the deuce do you hire cabs by the hour and in the night, too, besides promising twenty extra francs for speed? You must have taken leave of your senses!" cried the astounded man, "What will you do now? See if you can't find a little money in your father's chest."

These last words recalled what he had forgotten in his paroxysm of grief. His father was rich, and there must surely be some money about the place. Not wishing to prosecute his search in the presence of a stranger, however, he said carelessly: "Tell the man to wait, as may need the cab again this morning. If I am not down in half an hour, come up and I shall give you the money."

"But this will increase the bill, and if you cannot pay —" the man began to remonstrate.

"I know what I am doing," interrupted Louis, coldly; "you may go."

Once alone, he shrank from the task imposed upon him; this investigation, at such a moment, seemed almost a sacrilege. But necessity forced him to resign himself to it, and he stifled his scruples as best he might.

The furniture of the room was composed of a writing table, a dresser, and an old black-walnut chest divided into two compartments, such as we find in the houses of well-to-do peasants. After a fruitless search of the table and dresser, Louis turned to the old chest. A few pieces of worn clothes lay scattered about, but nothing else; and in the long drawer that separated the compartments, he found a bundle of unimportant papers only. Thinking this drawer might contain a secret hiding place, however, he drew it out completely, and was rewarded for his trouble by finding a small brass button beneath it. As he pressed this button, he was astonished to see the bottom of the first compartment drop slowly down, revealing a space of about six inches in depth, with diverging shelves lined in garnet velvet. Symmetrically arranged between these shelves were innumerable piles of gold pieces, repre-

senting all countries and epochs. Each piece had evidently been frequently and vigorously rubbed and cleaned, for the whole glittered with almost dazzling brilliancy.

Notwithstanding his overwhelming grief, Louis was completely dazzled for a moment at sight of this treasure, the value of which he knew must be considerable; and it was not until the first impression had passed over, that he remarked a piece of folded paper almost beneath his fingers. Recognizing his father's hand-writing, he picked it up eagerly and read these words:

"This collection of gold coins was begun September 7, 1803; its actual value is 287,634 francs. (See paragraph IV. in my last will and testament, confided to M. Marainville, notary, Rue Sainte-Anne, No. 28, who also has all papers, deeds and titles. See also sealed envelope, behind Spanish coin, fifth shelf.)"

Removing several piles of the large, heavy coins, Louis at last found an envelope, sealed in black and bearing these words in big letters:

"TO MY WELL-BELOVED SON."

Before he could open it, however, there

was a knock on the door; and, remembering that he had told the *concierge* to return in half an hour, he grasped one of the Spanish coins under his hand and quickly pressed the button that closed the treasure box.

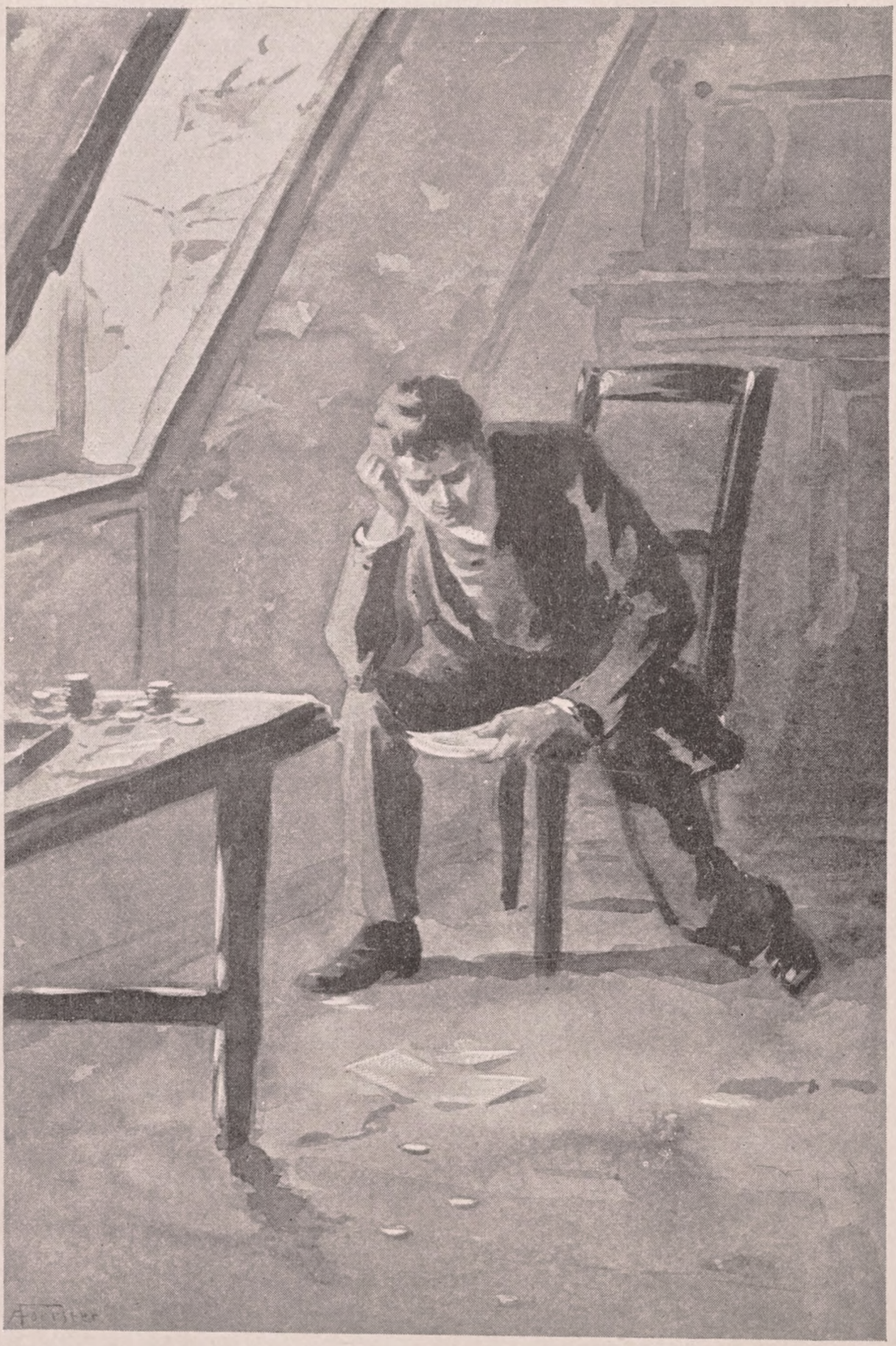
"What a fine gold piece!" exclaimed the amazed *concierge*, when the young man handed him the coin. "It looks like new, and I never saw one like it! How much is it worth?"

"More than the sum I owe," replied Louis, impatiently; "take it to a money broker and pay the coachman."

"Did your father leave you many of these pretty coins, Monsieur Louis?" queried the man in a mysterious whisper. "Who would have believed that the poor old man —"

"Go!" cried Louis, irritated at the cynicism of this question. "Pay the coachman, and don't let me see you again."

The man withdrew without another word; and, having bolted the door to save himself from further intrusion, the miser's son returned to the chest. For a moment he stood contemplating the dazzling treasure before



HE UNFOLDED THE SHEET CONTAINING THE LAST WISHES OF HIS FATHER.

him, and though he reproached himself for thinking of his own happiness in that terrible hour, he could not help feeling a thrill of delight at the thought that one-fourth that sum would insure comfort and independence to his Mariette for a whole lifetime.

Then he tried to forget the cruel stratagem employed by his father toward the poor girl, and even succeeded in convincing himself that he would have obtained his consent to their union; and that, though he might not have admitted his wealth, he would at least have amply provided for them.

The discovery of these riches did not inspire him with that covetous, revengeful joy usually experienced by the heirs of a miser, when they remember the cruel privations to which they were subjected through the avarice of the owner; it was, on the contrary, with a feelling of touching pious respect, and with a hand trembling with emotion, that he unfolded the sheet containing the last wishes of his beloved father.

CHAPTER XII.

The testament had been written two months previous and was in these terms:

"My beloved son:"

"When you read these lines I shall have ceased to live."

"You have always believed me poor; but I leave you an immense fortune accumulated by my *avarice.*

"I have been *miserly*, and do not attempt to excuse my fault; far from it, I am proud of it and glory in it.

"And this is why:

"Until the day of your birth, which robbed me of your mother, I was unmindful of augmenting my patrimony and the dowry brought me by my wife; the moment I had a son, however, that sentiment of foresight, which becomes a sacred duty to a father, took possession of me, developing slowly into a love of economy, then into parsimony, and finally into avarice.

"Moreover, you never suffered through the privations I imposed upon myself. Born sound and robust, the virile simplicity of your education has, I believe, aided the development of your excellent constitution.

"When you reached the age of instruction, I sent you to a school opened to the children of poor parents; to begin with, it was a means of economy; and besides, this mode of education was calculated to form and develop habits of a modest, laborious life. The success of this plan surpassed my expectations. Raised among poor children, you never acquired those factitious, expensive tastes; never experienced those bitter envies or vain jealousies which often influence our fate fatally.

"I also spared you many griefs which, though childish, are none the less cruel.

"You have never had to compare your condition to others more elevated or more opulent than your own.

"You have never felt the pangs of that envious hatred inspired by comrades in speaking of the splendor of their homes, boasting of the antique nobility of their race, or the wealth they would enjoy some day.

"It is generally believed that because children of dissimilar conditions wear the same uniform, eat at the same table, and follow the same course of study, a sentiment of equality exists between them.

"This is a deep error.

"Social inequality is as well understood among children as it is among their elders.

"The son of a rich bourgeois or of a nobleman, almost invariably betrays at the age of ten the arrogance, or haughtiness he will display in fifteen years later.

"Whether children are *little men*, or men are *grown children* matters little; all have the consciousness of their condition.

"As for you, surrounded as you were by children of the poor, you heard them continually speak of the hard labors of their parents; the indispensable necessity of work was therefore early impressed on your mind.

"Others of your companions dwelt on the privations and miseries endured by their families; you thus became accustomed to the idea of our poverty.

"Lastly, you saw the greater number of these children resigned and courageous — two of the greatest virtues in the world — and

until now, my beloved son, courage and resignation have never failed you.

"At fifteen you competed for a scholarship in one of the high schools, where you finished your studies. Your first education had already borne excellent fruits; for, although many of your new companions belonged to the aristocratic world, their contact never altered your precious qualities, and you never knew the meaning of either jealousy or envy.

"Later, you entered as junior clerk in a notary's office, with a man who has long been my friend, and who alone holds the secret and administers my fortune. Until now, the discretion of this friend has equaled his devotion Near him, you have acquired a perfect knowledge of business; and, thanks to my foresight, you shall be in a position to skilfully and advantageously administer the considerable wealth I have amassed.

"My conscience does not reproach me; and yet, I admit that I sometimes fear you will address this reproach to my memory:

"*While you accumulated these riches, my father, you condemned me without mercy to the most cruel privations.*

"Reflection drives this fear from my heart,

however; I remember how frequently you have assured me that you were satisfied with your condition, and that if you desired luxuries it was only for my sake.

"In fact, your inexhaustible humor and gentleness, your natural gaiety of spirits and tender affection for me sufficiently prove that you are contented. Moreover, do I not share your privations? Your own economies, added to my earnings as a public scribe, have permitted us to live without touching my revenues. The capital has thus been growing for twenty years in the hands of my prudent administrator.

"On the day on which I pen these lines, my fortune amounts to about two millions and a half.

"I know not how many years of life may still be allotted to me, but in ten years I shall have attained the average length of human life; you shall then be thirty-five years of age; and since a capital doubles itself in ten years, my wealth shall have attained the enormous sum of four or five millions.

"Unless I am stricken down suddenly, you shall therefore, in all probability, attain your complete maturity before entering into posses-

sion of these riches. Your sober, modest, industrious habits, contracted in childhood, shall be as a second nature to you; and your knowledge of business will be still more developed by practice. Add to these advantages your uprightness of mind, your strong physical constitution — unimpaired by early excesses — and you will find yourself in the best possible condition to inherit the wealth I have amassed, as well as to enjoy it according to your own tastes which, I am sure, can be nothing but generous and honorable.

"You may, perhaps, ask why I simply left my capital to multiply by itself, instead of attempting some great financial operation or enjoying the delights of luxury?

"I shall tell you why, my dear child.

"Although my avarice had its origin in a sentiment of paternal foresight, it has now assumed all the inherent characteristics of a violent passion.

"I could, and can still, deprive myself of everything to accumulate riches upon riches, happy in the thought that it is all for you, and that you will enjoy this gold some day; but to release my hold on any part of my belongings, for any object whatever, or risk anything in

financial operations is impossible — no! not while I live! It would be tearing my heart out by the core; for the possession of his treasure is life itself to a miser. Without spending or risking one farthing, I can give myself up in imagination to the most hazardous or magnificent operations. And this is neither a vain desire nor an empty dream. No! no! with what I possess, those magnificences and splendors are realizable to-day, to-morrow, this very hour, if I choose.

"How then can you expect that a miser should have the courage or will to release his hold on such a talisman? What! for one project, one realized dream, would I sacrifice a thousand projects, a thousand realizable dreams? Besides, is not my son happy as he is? Would he not be the pride of the proudest of fathers? And is it not for him, *for him only*, that I hoard up these treasures?

"Had I acted differently, what would have been the result?

"Had I been lavish, my prodigality would have left you in misery; and had I spent my income only, we would doubtless have lived in idleness and enjoyed a few physical joys or

vain satisfactions, but what would we have gained?

"Should we have become better? I know not. But at my death I would have left you a reasonable income only, and not sufficient to realize any large and generous undertaking.

"One last word, my dear son, in answer to a reproach you may address my memory.

"Believe me, if you have been left in ignorance of my riches, it was not through a sentiment of dissimulation or distrust of you.

"These were my reasons:

"Had you known of my riches, though you might perhaps have accepted the humble existence I imposed on you without a murmur, you would have accused me in your heart of harshness and egotism; and, who knows, the certainty of future riches might perhaps also have impaired your precious qualities.

"This is not all — forgive me this foolish fear, this apprehension which is so unjust to your excellent heart — but to enjoy your filial affection in all its purity and disinterestedness during my life, it was necessary that you should have no thought of an opulent inheritance after my death.

"Another reason, the gravest of all, per-

haps, has led me to conceal my riches — I love you so tenderly, that it would have been impossible for me to see you undergo any privation if you had known that I could provide the most sumptuous existence for you.

"Notwithstanding the apparent contradiction that seems to exist between this sentiment and my avaricious conduct toward you, I hope, my dear child, that you will understand my thought.

"And now, I place myself in spirit face to face with death, which may strike me to-day, to-morrow, or this very hour; and I declare, in this supreme and solemn moment, that I bless you from the depth of my soul, my dear beloved child, you who have given me joy and happiness only in this world.

"Be a hundred times blessed, Louis, my good, affectionate son; be happy according to your merits, and my last wishes will be accomplished.

"Your father, A. RICHARD.

"Written and copied in Paris, February 25, 18—"

CHAPTER XIII.

Louis was deeply moved by the reading of this singular testament, and wept long as he reflected on the eccentricities of his beloved father. The day was drawing to a close, when he was finally aroused from his grief by a knock at his door and the well known voice of Florestan de Saint-Herem.

Quickly unbolting the door of the gloomy attic chamber, he found himself in his friend's arms, who cried sympathetically:

"Louis! my poor Louis! I know all. The *concierge* has just told me of your father's death. Ah! what a cruel, frightful accident!"

"Read this, Florestan," said Louis, with tears in his eyes, giving his friend the testament left by his father, "and you will understand my bitter grief."

Saint-Herem took the paper and, seating himself by the window, read it to the end.

"Do you think I can now blame his ava-

rice?" asked Louis, when his friend had finished. "Was not his only aim to enrich me, to place me in a position to gain more wealth, or to make a generous use of the possessions he left me? He imposed the hardest privations on himself that he might hoard up treasures for me!"

"Nothing surprises me on the part of a miser," returned Florestan. "They are capable of great things — and this applies to all who are a prey to that powerful and prolific passion."

"Don't exaggerate, Florestan."

"This may seem a paradox to you, but there is nothing more true. We have always been stupidly unjust to misers," went on Florestan, with growing enthusiasm. "The genius and zeal they display in inventing inconceivable, impossible economies is prodigious. Altars should be raised in their honor! Thanks to their wise, obstinate parsimony, they possess a wonderful knack of turning everything into gold; careful saving of matches, picking up stray pins, a centime carefully invested; in fact, the most trifling of economies bring in

returns. And yet, the world denies the existence of alchemists, the inventors of the philosophical stone! Once more, I repeat it, do they not turn into gold what is nothing in other hands!"

"You are right enough on that score," laughed Louis.

"On that and on all other scores," rejoined Florestan, seriously. "Now, my dear fellow, follow well my comparison; it is worthy of my most brilliant days of rhetoric! Take a dry, sterile land, and dig a well into it; what happens? The smallest springs, the thinnest stream of subterranean water, the invisible tears of the earth, evaporated or lost until then without profit to anyone, will concentrate, drop by drop, into the bottom of this well; little by little the water will increase and rise, the reservoir will fill; then, if a beneficent hand spreads this salutary spray liberally, verdure and blossoms will appear as if by enchantment on that hitherto unfruitful, desolate soil. Now, Louis, is not my comparison good? Is not the miser's hidden treasure like this deep well, where, thanks to his obstinate and coura-

geous savings, riches accumulate drop by drop, forming a reservoir from which may spring luxury, splendors, magnificence and prodigalities of all sorts?"

"My dear Florestan," said Louis, drawn from his grief by his friend's enthusiasm, "though my judgment of my father's conduct may have been influenced by filial affection, your course of reasoning on the subject of economy proves that I was not far wrong, at least."

"You are indeed right, Louis; for if we take a philosophical view of avarice, the miser is still more admirable."

"This appears less just."

"Do you not admit that, sooner or later, these riches, so laboriously amassed by the miser, will almost inevitably shower magnificences of all sorts; for the proverb says: *A miserly father makes a prodigal son.*"

"I admit that prodigality is the usual dispenser of these long-hoarded treasures; but where do you see philanthropy in that?"

"Where do I see it? Why, in everything! Do not the consequences of luxury and mag-

nificence bring ease and comfort to the hundreds of families that weave silks and laces, chisel gold and silver, carve precious stones, build palaces, sculpture the ebony of furniture, varnish carriages, breed thoroughbred horses, and cultivate rare flowers? Have not artists, architects, musicians, singers, *danseuses*, all that is art, pleasure, poetry, enchantment, a large share of the gold shower that produces these wonders? And does not this gold shower spring from that magical reservoir so slowly and perseveringly filled by the miser? Therefore, without the miser, we should have no reservoir, no gold shower, and none of the marvels which this sparkling, beneficent dew alone can produce — Now, let us look at the miser from a catholic point of view —"

"Look at the miser from a catholic point of view!" echoed Louis, in astonishment.

"That is exactly where he is truly admirable," rejoined Saint-Herem, imperturbably.

"I confess that this theory seems to me difficult to sustain."

"On the contrary, it is most simple. Is

not abnegation one of the greatest virtues known?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well, my dear Louis, I defy you to cite me a monastic order whose members practice the renouncement of worldly pleasures more absolutely and sincerely than the miser. And his renouncement is truly the more heroic, because he has within his grasp all the delights and enchantments of soul, mind and senses, and possesses the incredible courage to refuse them all. There is strength, there is the triumph of an energetic will."

"But you must take into consideration that avarice almost invariably stifles all other passions, and the renunciation is less difficult to a miser than to another. In depriving himself, he satisfies his predominant passion."

"Just so! And is not a power a great passion that will lead to such renunciation? But where the miser is truly sublime, is in his disinterestedness."

"The miser's disinterestedness? You must be jesting, Florestan!"

"Yes, I repeat it, he is truly sublime in

his disinterestedness! The miser is perfectly aware that he is despised and execrated during life, and that his death will be greeted with delight by his heirs; yet, you cannot name a single one who has tried to make his treasure disappear with him, with a view of avenging his wrongs. Two millions in bank notes may be turned to ashes in five minutes, and leave no trace; but no, these good-natured misers, full of magnanimity and forgiveness, forget their injuries and enrich their heirs. I know of nothing comparable to the martyrdom of a miser; and it is not the torture of an hour, but of a lifetime. He knows that the treasure, amassed so painfully and with so many privations, will never be enjoyed by himself; that the fatal hour will come when this gold, which he loves more than life, shall be dissipated in riotous living, in foolish orgies, in the midst of which his name and memory shall, perhaps, be scoffed and insulted — and by his own son, alas! And yet he has no thought of punishing such insolent cupidity by destroying his treasure! Ah! believe me, Louis, avarice is a strong, mighty passion; and nothing that is

strong and great can be useless. God, in His infinite wisdom, did not create passions without an aim — that is, a power without its use. If he endowed misers with incredible concentration of will, it is because they have some mysterious purpose to achieve. I repeat it, all forces have and must have their expansion, all well-directed passions their fruitful issues. Let us suppose, for instance, that a minister of finance should bring to the management and economy of public affairs that inflexibility which characterizes the miser; would not many wonders result from such avarice? Though Fouquet ruined the finances of France, never was the country more flourishing than under Colbert; without this avaricious minister, the prodigalities of Louis XIV would have been impossible; and all those marvels of magnificence, of art and poetry, would have remained unknown. As you see, all is linked, enchained together; each cause produces its effect; the prodigality of Louis XIV is the consequence of the avarice of Colbert."

"Remember, Florestan," said Louis, sadly, "that while this *great king*, whose memory I

have always abhorred, was ruining the country by his insolent prodigalities, the heavily-taxed people were living in atrocious servitude to provide for the bold ostentations of Louis XIV, his mistresses and their children. And what misery still exists in our days! Ah! if you knew what a life of wretchedness Mariette has endured. Athough the poor child is strong and courageous, the sight of such frightful destitution would fill your heart with bitter resentment."

"What will you, I am a philanthropist in my own way; I take things as they come, and, as I cannot do better, I spend to my last farthing. None can accuse me of encouraging the idleness of luxurious industries."

"I do not accuse your generous heart, my friend; the man who spends his money liberally or foolishly, provides work for the poor, and work is bread — yet, you laud avarice."

"My dear fellow, who would appreciate the excellence of arms, if not the warrior? The excellence of a horse, if not the cavalier? The excellence of a lute, if not the player? Paganini, as pope, would have canonized

Stradivarius, the maker of those wonderful violins, which the great artist plays so admirably. Therefore, as I have the presumption of playing admirably with millions, I would canonize my uncle, that heroic martyr of avarice, if distributive justice would only place in my hands the wonderful instruments of prodigality he is manufacturing by hoarding his money."

"Ah! heavens!" cried Louis, suddenly gazing at his friend with a horrified expression.

"What is it?" asked Saint-Herem, quietly.

"Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"True enough, M. Ramon decided to come to Paris very suddenly."

"Is my uncle in Paris?"

"Ah! Florestan, what strange things happen in this world—"

"What do you mean?"

"And to think that I should be the one to announce it, after the conversation we have just had together!—It is, indeed, most strange!"

"But what in the deuce have you to

announce? And what is there so strange about it?"

"I have told you that my father had arranged a marriage between your cousin and myself."

"Yes, what then?"

"Being in ignorance of my refusal, and wishing to hasten a marriage he desired as ardently as my father, your uncle and his daughter left Dreux yesterday and arrived this morning —"

"In Paris. Well, what of it? Why this hesitation and embarrassment on your part, my dear Louis?"

"They did not come directly to Paris, but stopped at Versailles — at Versailles — where my poor father went —"

At this thought, which revived all his grief for his father's terrible death, Louis again broke into sobs.

"My dear friend, I understand your bitter grief," said Florestan. moved by his friend's emotion, "but try to be more courageous."

"If I hesitate in speaking more clearly," resumed the young man, when he had wiped

away his tears, "it is because, in this hour of sorrow and mourning, I feel to be painfully affected in seeing the satisfaction — very excusable perhaps — which the announcement I have to make will no doubt cause you."

"In heaven's name, Louis, explain yourself!" entreated Saint-Herem, in alarm.

"As I have already told you, my father went to Versailles to meet your uncle and his daughter"

"And then?"

"They must have taken the train together, entered the same compartment — and —"

"My God! — it would be too horrible!" cried Florestan, burying his face in his hands.

The cry of horror and compassion was so spontaneous and sincere, that Louis was touched by this proof of kindness of heart on the part of his friend, whose first impulse had been a sentiment of generous commiseration, and not of cynical, covetous joy.

CHAPTER XIV.

A long interval of silence followed, which Louis was the first to break.

"I cannot tell you how your grief touches me, Florestan," he said, with effusion, "it is so much in sympathy with what I feel at this sad moment."

"What will you, my friend; as you are aware, I had but little affection for my uncle, and could jest concerning his inheritance when I believed him in perfect health. But it would require a heart of stone and an outrageous cupidity to feel no sorrow at the terrible fate which my uncle and his daughter may have met. As to what I have said of avarice, that passion whose consequences are so fruitful, I retract nothing; only I might have treated the subject more seriously had I known it to be a personal question. But I have, at least, proved that I am not of those who receive an inheritance with cynical joy. Now, my dear Louis,

forgive me if I ask a question which may revive your grief. In the painful researches made by you to recover your father's remains, did anything lead you to hope that my uncle and his daughter might have escaped?"

"All I can say, Florestan, is, that I did not see them among the injured or dying. As to the victims whose fate they and my father must have shared, their features are unrecognizable."

"As they must have been with your father, they probably shared his fate. However, I shall write to Dreux and make active researches. If you hear of anything new, let me know — But, in the midst of all these sad incidents, I am forgetting Mariette — "

"It was only a cruel misunderstanding, as you suspected. I found her more affectionate and devoted than ever."

"Her love will be a precious consolation in your sorrow — Now, good-bye, my poor Louis. Remember that you may always trust in my affection and friendship for you."

"Ah! Florestan, were it not for your friendship and Mariette's love, I know not how I could bear this crushing blow. Good-bye,

my friend, and let me know all you can discover concerning your uncle."

Once alone, Louis pondered long over what he should do. Finally, coming to a determination, he placed the gold he had discovered into a traveling bag, thrust the will into his pocket, and at once proceeded to the office of his employer, the notary and friend mentioned by his father.

The notary was much affected by the details of the probable death of his client and, having expressed his sympathy to Louis, promised to fulfill all the legal formalities necessary to establish the death of the old miser.

"There remains one question I wish to ask," said Louis, when all the arrangements had been agreed upon. "When all these sad formalities have been gone through, can I dispose of my father's possessions?"

"Most assuredly, my dear Louis," replied the notary.

"These, then, are my intentions. I have brought you a sum of money amounting to over two hundred thousand francs, which I

found hidden in a drawer; with this gold I wish to assure a pension of twelve hundred francs to the godmother of my fiancé."

"But is the young girl in a position that—" interrupted the notary.

"The young girl in question earns her own bread," broke in Louis in his turn. "But I love her, and no power on earth can prevent me from marrying her," he concluded, in a firm, resolute tone.

"Very well," assented the notary, realizing the uselessness of his observations; "the pension shall be paid to the person indicated by you."

"Besides, I will take about fifteen thousand francs to fit up a suitable home," added Louis.

"Only fifteen thousand francs!" exclaimed the notary, astonished at the modest request. "Will it be sufficient?"

"My fiancé and myself have been accustomed to a life of labor and poverty, and our ambitions have never gone beyond an existence of modest comfort. An income of a thousand crowns per annum, joined to our own earnings, will therefore amply suffice for our wants."

"Joined to your earnings! What do you mean to do?"

"Remain in your office, if I have not derogated in your estimation."

"What! Work, with an income of over a hundred thousand livres?"

"I cannot yet believe that this large fortune is mine, my dear friend; and even though my poor father's death may be established according to legal formalities, I shall always retain a hope that I may again see him."

"My poor Louis, your hope is an illusion."

"It is an illusion I shall retain as long as possible, monsieur; and while it lasts I shall never feel free to dispose of my father's money, save within the limits I have mentioned."

"No son could act with more perfect and honorable reserve, my dear Louis. But what will you do with the rest of the inheritance?"

"So long as there remains the slightest hope of finding my father among the living, you will remain the trustee of his possessions."

"I can only express my admiration for you, my dear Louis. You could not better honor the memory of your father than in acting thus.

Everything shall be as you desire; I accept your trust, and will manage the estate as in the past; and I shall this very day make out the contract for the life pension you have mentioned."

"Speaking of that subject, my dear friend, I must enter into details that will seem trifling to you, but which, nevertheless, have their painful side."

"Well?"

"The poor woman to whom this pension is to be given has been so cruelly tried during her long existence, that her character, though naturally generous, has become embittered and distrustful; a promise of happiness would be vain in her eyes, unless accompanied by palpable, material proof — therefore, to convince this unfortunate creature of the reality of the pension promised, I shall take with me the sum of fifteen thousand francs in gold, which represents the capital of her life income. It is the only means of convincing her of my good intentions toward her."

"Nothing is more simple, my dear Louis," acquiesced the notary. "Take what you de-

sire, and rest assured that the papers will be drawn this very day."

After a cordial pressure of the hand, Louis left the old notary and turned in the direction of Mariette's home.

CHAPTER XV.

Louis found Mariette working patiently beside her godmother, who was apparently sound asleep in her bed and oblivious of her unfortunate lot for a few moments, at least.

The young man's extreme pallor, the alteration of his features and their painful expression, struck Mariette at once and filled her with grave apprehensions.

"My God! something has happened, Louis!" she cried, coming quickly toward him.

"Yes, something terrible has happened, Mariette," he said sadly. "Have you heard of the terrible accident on the Versailles road?"

"Yes, what a frightful thing! They say there was a large number of victims," she rejoined, with a shudder.

"My father was of the number," he added, simply.

The words had scarcely passed his lips,

when he felt two soft arms encircle his neck and hot tears inundating his cheeks, while the young girl sobbed as though her heart would break. The two young people remained thus clasped in each other's arms for several moments without uttering a word. Louis was the first to break the painful silence.

"My darling," he said, "you know what deep affection existed between my father and myself — you can understand my despair."

"Your loss is terrible, Louis."

"Your love is my only consolation, Mariette; and I shall ask a new proof —"

"You have but to command — my heart is yours."

"We must marry within the shortest possible delay."

'Ah! Louis! can you doubt my answer for a moment? Is this the new proof of love that you ask?" she said, half reproachfully. Then, after a moment of reflection, she added sadly: "Yet we cannot marry before the end of your mourning."

"My dear Mariette, pray do not let such a scruple stand between us."

"I shall do as you wish."

"Listen, Mariette," said the young man, earnestly: "true mourning is that of the soul, and with me it will endure long beyond the time limited by society and the world in general. My heart is crushed with sorrow, and I can honor the memory of my father without conforming to customs of propriety. And believe me, my darling, a marriage contracted under the painful impressions caused by my sad loss, will appear more solemn and sacred than if contracted under other circumstances."

"You may be right, Louis; yet it is customary to wait," ventured the young girl.

"My dear Mariette, shall my father be less deeply regretted because you are my wife, and weep over his death with me, because you are wearing mourning for him and are attached to his memory by a tender link? Besides, my darling, in my grief and isolation, I cannot live without you — I would die."

"I am only a poor working girl, ignorant of the ways of the world, and can only express what I feel, Louis," rejoined Mariette, unable to resist his pleadings. "The reasons you

plead for an early marriage seem good to me. I may be wrong, or I may, perhaps, be influenced by my longing to be yours; but I know that I can accede to an immediate marriage without regret or remorse. And yet, it seems to me my heart is as tender as others —"

"Yes, and more ungrateful, too!" interrupted a harsh voice; and Mme. Lacombe sat bolt upright in her bed, glaring fiercely at the astounded young couple. "Ah! yes," she went on, sarcastically, "you thought the old woman sound asleep, and took advantage of it to talk of your wedding. But I heard every word of it."

"There was not a word which you might not hear, madame," observed Louis, gravely. "Mariette and myself retract nothing we have said."

"The deuce! — I believe it — you think of nothing but yourself. You can talk of nothing but that accursed marriage. As for me — I might as well be in my grave —"

"Allow me to interrupt you, madame," broke in Louis, "and prove that I have not forgotten my promise."

As he spoke, he took a small wooden box from the table, where he had laid it on entering, and deposited it on the bed with the key.

"Open it," he said; "all it contains is yours."

The old woman picked up the key suspiciously, opened the box and peered in.

"Great heavens!" she cried in amazement, dazzled by the glittering contents. Then plunging her hand among the shining pieces, she tossed them about, jingling them together and allowing them to slip through her fingers in a golden shower, muttering covetously: "Ah! what gold! what gold! — all good and sound, too! — Heavens! what beautiful pieces! What a big sum they must make!"

Turning the box over, she gathered the coins into a dazzling pile, and added with a sigh: "That would bring comfort and ease to two poor women like Mariette and me for a lifetime!"

"Those fifteen thousand francs are yours, madame," observed Louis.

"Mine!" she cried, "mine!" then shaking her head incredulously, she resumed sharply:

"That's it, laugh at a poor old woman — why can't you leave me in peace? — I don't see why this should belong to me!"

"The money is to be used to provide a pension of twelve hundred francs for you," declared the young man, "that you may be independent after our marriage; for we shall be married as soon as possible."

"Ah! yes; so you wish to bribe the old woman, and be rid of her once for all," growled the irritable Mme. Lacombe. "Do you imagine I would sell myself for money?"

"Dear godmother," cried Mariette, throwing her arms about the woman's neck, "don't say we want to get rid of you! Louis had no thought of humiliating you with the money, he merely did what you requested."

"I know it; but what will you, child," she said, softened in spite of herself. "It was the fear of starving in the streets, the fear of seeing you unhappily married that suggested the idea of a pension to me. I know that I have no right to expect such a thing; but one can never imagine what terror is inspired by the thought of being cast into the streets penniless,

old and infirm as I am! — All I want is a poor mattress in a corner, a crust of bread, and the sight of Mariette's sweet face. I am so accustomed to see her come and go in this wretched room, that if she were not there I would think myself shut up in a dark tomb. And besides, she is the only person in the world who could be kind to me — all I ask is to remain with Mariette. That pile of gold dazzled me for a moment, but then it humiliated me too in my heart. One may be but a worm, and yet have some pride — and yet, when that man offered me gold for Mariette the other day, I was not humiliated — I was only furious. But now, here I am weeping; and Mariette knows I have not shed a tear for the last ten years. Bitterness may eat away the heart, but it does not melt it."

"These tears will do you good, godmother," said Mariette gently.

"Have confidence in the future, madame," added Louis, consolingly. "Mariette will never leave you. We shall not live in luxury, but in modest comfort; and Mariette shall continue

to love you as a mother, while I shall love you as a dutiful son."

"Are you really in earnest? do you really mean to keep me with you?" she asked, gazing earnestly into their faces, as though she would read their inmost thoughts.

At this new proof of invincible distrust, the young people exchanged a look of compassion; then, taking the sick woman's hand in hers, Mariette said tenderly: "Yes, dear godmother, we shall keep you always with us, and nurse you as we would our own mother; you shall see how happy we shall make life to you —"

"Yes, we shall make your life a dream of happiness," added Louis, affectionately.

The voice, accent, expression and earnestness of the two young people would have convinced the most skeptic; but alas! an absolute, complete belief in sudden happiness could not penetrate this poor soul so long corroded by suffering.

"I believe you, my children," she said, with a suppressed sigh, trying to hide her involuntary doubt. "Yes, I believe Monsieur

Louis has the money; I believe that you both feel some affection for me, also — but you know, a new broom sweeps clean! People are willing enough at first, but things change with time. Besides, I may be in the way; newly married people love to be alone, and an old grumbler like me spoils the beauty of a cozy house. You will be afraid of my sharp words, grow weary of me, or — "

"Ah! godmother, do you still doubt us?" cried Mariette, reproachfully.

"You must forgive me, my children, but it is stronger than myself," rejoined the unhappy woman, bursting into sobs. "But then," she added, with a forced smile, "it may be better so; for if I were to suddenly believe in happiness, after more than fifty years of sorrow and misery, I would surely go mad. And upon my word, it would not surprise me," she concluded bitterly, "it would be just my luck."

CHAPTER XVI.

Five years had glided by since the eventful incidents related in the preceding chapters, and another anniversary of the Versailles disaster had been added to the list.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening, and a tall, slender brunette, of elegant form and figure, whose beautiful face expressed intelligence and firmness both, was giving the finishing touches to a dazzling toilette. She was assisted in this serious and important occupation by two skillful maids, one of whom was clasping a necklace of large, sparkling diamonds around the white throat of her charming mistress, while the other adjusted a magnificent diadem of the same precious stones on the raven black hair.

The choice of these diamonds had evidently been made after much deliberation, for a number of jewel cases, containing pearls, rubies, and other precious ornaments of enormous

value, still lay open on a toilet table near by.

One of the maids, being much older than her companion, and having been in the service of her mistress for many years, seemed to enjoy a certain degree of familiarity near the countess—who was a Russian as well as herself—which permitted her many observations not usually tolerated from her class.

"Does madame like the diadem as it is now?" she asked in her own tongue.

"Well enough," replied Countess Zomaloff, nonchalantly, casting a last glance at the large mirror before her. "Where is my bouquet?"

"Here, madame."

"Heavens! how frightfully yellow and faded it is!" cried the countess, shrinking back.

"The duke has just sent it," ventured the maid.

"I recognize his good taste," said the countess sarcastically, as she shrugged her pretty shoulders disdainfully. "I would wager the flowers were ordered yesterday morning by some lover who broke off with his mistress

during the day, and consequently did not call for them in the evening. The Duke de Riancourt is the only man in the world capable of discovering such bargains!"

"Ah! madame, can you believe he would economize to that point?" protested the maid. "He is so rich!"

"That makes it only the more probable."

A rap on the door of the boudoir adjoining the dressing-room, interrupted the conversation, and the French maid vanished, returning almost immediately with the information that the duke had arrived and was at madame's orders.

"Let him wait," observed the countess carelessly. "Is the princess in the drawing-room?"

"Yes, madame."

"Very well — here Katinka, clasp this bracelet," resumed the countess, addressing the Russian maid in her own language once more, "and see what time it is."

Katinka turned to the clock and was opening her lips to reply, when her mistress

forestalled her by saying, with a mocking smile:

"After all, why should I make such an inquiry. The duke has just arrived, half-past nine must — "

The half-hour stroke from the clock on the chimney interrupted her, and she broke into a merry, rippling laugh.

"What did I tell you, Katinka," she laughed, "the duke is a veritable clock in exactitude."

"It proves his love and devotion, madame," rejoined the maid.

"I would prefer a less well-regulated love, Katinka," retorted the countess. "These persons who worship at fixed hours seem to have a watch where the heart ought to be. There now, I am almost sorry to be so completely dressed and ready, and to have no excuse to make that poor duke wait longer to reward him for his pitiless exactitude."

"But, madame," remonstrated the maid, "if you dislike him so, why do you marry him?"

"Why?" echoed the countess, absent-mind-

edly, giving another glance at the mirror; "why do I marry M. de Riancourt? Really, Katinka, you are more inquisitive than I am; does one ever know why one marries?"

"Everybody seems to think there exist excellent reasons for this marriage, nevertheless," pursued Katinka. "Although M. de Riancourt has no gold mines in Crimea, silver mines in the Ural Mountains, diamond —"

"In mercy, Katinka, don't go over the list of my riches!" cried the countess, impatiently.

"Well, madame, although the duke has not your immense possessions, he is one of the wealthiest and greatest noblemen in France; he is young and handsome, has never led a dissipated life, and —"

"And he is worthy of wearing a wreath of orange blossoms on our wedding day — a right which I have not; but, in heaven's name, spare me his virtues. My aunt sounds his praises loud enough without assistance."

"Yes, the princess is very fond of monsieur le duc, and she is not the only one who —"

"Give me a cloak," interrupted her mistress, "the night is chilly."

"Has madame given her orders for the twentieth of the month?" went on the persistent maid.

"What orders?"

"Has madame forgotten that her marriage takes place a week from to-day?"

"What! a week from to-day? — so soon!"

"Madame fixed the date for May 20, and this is May 12 —"

"If I said the twentieth, I suppose it must be on the twentieth — give me my fan."

The maid brought a collection of magnificent fans and placed them before her mistress to allow her to make a choice.

"How singular," murmured the countess, half to herself, as she picked out a veritable Watteau from the rich collection; "I am young and free, and abhor constraint, yet I have chosen a master."

"A master!" exclaimed Katinka. "Why, the duke is so good and kind, madame! You will make whatever you wish of him."

"I shall never make an agreeable man of

him; and yet, I shall marry him. Ah! my good aunt, your advice may cause me to commit a great folly," she added, half laughing, half serious, as she gazed mechanically at the mischievous little god of love on her fan. "I made a blind choice among men equal in rank and riches, all so mediocre and uninteresting that it mattered not which I chose. This was the motive of my preference for M. de Riancourt, Katinka. Besides, although marriage has its inconveniences, widowhood has still greater ones. So, it is the better to marry, after all; it saves the trouble of wondering what we shall do."

Having thus summarily settled this question, Countess Zomaloff proceeded to the drawing-room, where she found her aunt and the duke awaiting her.

Princess Wileska was a tall, distingué woman, with powdered hair and imposing presence, who presented a striking contrast to the meagre personage engaged in conversation with her. The Duke de Riancourt was a small, nervous man of thirty years or thereabouts, with a sanctimonious, unctuous mien, shifting eyes

and long, smooth hair, carefully parted near the middle of the forehead, and a rigidity of movement that showed great empire over himself.

As the countess entered, he advanced toward her slowly, bowed low and raised her pretty hand to his lips with respectful courtesy; then, straightening himself up, he gazed at her for a moment as if dazzled, and cried, admiringly: "Ah! countess, I have never seen these diamonds! I don't believe you could find their equal anywhere. Heavens! how beautiful, how magnificent they are!"

"Really, my dear duke," rejoined the countess, with well feigned embarrassment, "I am much confused — that is, for the jeweler who sold them to me — one could never be more gallant than you; and since these diamonds cause you so much tender emotion, inspire such gracious compliments, such ingenious flattery, I can do no less than confide to you the charming name of the bewitching lapidary — his name is *Ezechiel Rabotautencraff*, and he resides in Frankfort."

While the amazed duke was searching a

reply to this sarcastic sally, the princess gave a reproachful glance to her niece; then, turning to the discomfited nobleman with a forced smile, said playfully:

"How much Foedora does like to tease you, my dear duke. This is her way of showing her affection to those she loves."

"I will humbly confess, my dear princess," said the duke, anxious to repair his awkward blunder, "that I was so dazzled by those magnificent stones that, for a moment, I forgot to render homage to the charms of the wearer. But — but — may not one be dazzled by the sun while gazing at a charming flower?"

"I find your comparison of the sunstroke and the flower so gallant and to the point," retorted the malicious young woman, "that I am tempted to believe it was this very same sunstroke that so outrageously withered these poor flowers," and a gay ripple of laughter broke from her lips, as she pointed to the faded blossoms sent by the duke that evening.

The unfortunate man flushed to the roots of his hair, while the princess frowned at her irrepressible niece.

"Pray offer your arm to my aunt, my dear duke," resumed the countess, totally indifferent to the divers emotions she had caused.

"I promised the embassadress de Sardaigne I would come early, as she is to present me to a relative, and, as you know, we must first visit that enchanted palace you spoke of, in all its details. This is an odd time for such a visit, it is true; but I admit I have a weakness or, rather, a passion, for anything odd. Originality is such a rare, charming thing!"

Preceding her aunt and the duke, the bewitching countess ran lightly down the wide stairs of the elegantly furnished house she had rented in the Rue de Rivoli, while in search of the mansion she wished to purchase in Paris.

On that evening the duke was to take his friends out in his own carriage; a very permissible liberty, since the bans of his marriage with the countess had already been published. After a few moments of waiting at the door of the mansion, the aunt and niece saw an enormous yellow landau advanding toward them, drawn by two emaciated horses mercilessly

lashed by a coachman in red and blue livery.

"Why — this is not your carriage?" gasped the countess, gazing at the duke in amazement as the footman opened the portière of the vehicle.

"Certainly, madame," he replied.

"And what has become of that pretty blue victoria, with the dapple grays, you placed at our disposal yesterday morning?"

"Under the present condition of affairs, my dear countess, I may as well make a clean breast of it," rejoined the duke, with touching *abandon.* "That I may not fatigue my valuable horses — for they did cost me enormously — I hire a carriage for the evening. This is a great point of economy, for it is always a risk to take out a valuable turnout at night."

"You are perfectly right, my dear duke," the princess hastened to say, fearing a new sarcasm from her niece; and, without further ado, she entered the heavy, lumbering thing, leaning on the arm of her escort.

The duke then offered his hand to the

countess to assist her in her turn; but she stopped with one dainty foot resting on the last step, and peered curiously within.

"My dear aunt," she said sweetly, "will you be kind enough to examine the carriage well?"

"Why, my dear," asked the princess naïvely.

"Because I am afraid some freckled, red-headed miss, or some fat city merchant may have been forgotten in some obscure corner of this thing. These worthy people usually drive out in family parties in just such equipages, and I have a horrible fear of finding some of them under the seats."

"Really, Foedora, I fail to understand you," returned the princess, angrily, while her niece sank in the seat beside her with a laugh. "You are absurdly severe toward M. de Riancourt—what can you be thinking of?"

"I want to cure him of his meanness and impudence," retorted the countess, coolly. "Could I better prove my interest in him?"

At that moment the duke entered the carriage and took his seat opposite the princess

and her niece. Though he seemingly endured with the most Christianly patience all the railleries of the young woman who possessed all kinds of precious mines, the furtive glance he cast on her now and then, and the contraction of his thin lips, betrayed the rancour that filled his heart and foreboded no good for the future.

"To the Ramon mansion," he ordered the footman, who stood at the door.

"Beg pardon, monsieur, but I don't know where it is," replied the man, respectfully.

"At the end of the *Cours-la-Reine*, in the direction of the *quartier Jean-Gonjan*," explained the duke.

"Monsieur means that large mansion which has been in course of construction for so many years?"

"That very place," assented the duke.

The footman closed the carriage door, gave his instructions to the coachman, who lashed his jaded horses, and the lumbering landau started in the direction of *Cours-la-Reine*, where the marvelous Saint-Ramon mansion was situated.

CHAPTER XVII.

The heavy vehicle rolled on so slowly, that a pedestrian walking in the same direction, easily kept up with it through the whole length of the *Cours-la-Reine*, although he seemed anything but nimble footed.

He was poorly dressed and leaned painfully on his stick; his long beard was white, as well as his hair and bushy eyebrows, and the dark color of his wrinkled face gave him the appearance of a mulatto.

As the landau approached the Saint-Ramon mansion, however, the coachman was forced to take his place in the long procession of carriages going in the same direction, thus permitting the pedestrian to gain a certain distance ahead.

The old mulatto continued his way slowly to the entrance of a broad avenue, encumbered with a long line of carriages and almost daz-

zling with bright colored lights, and paused in amazement at the gate.

"Why are these grounds so brilliantly illuminated?" he asked a curious looker-on.

"In honor of the opening of the wonderful *Saint-Ramon* mansion," replied the man addressed.

"*Saint Ramon!*" repeated the old man, softly, as if speaking to himself. "How strange!"

He seemed buried in reflections for a few minutes, then turning once more to the man he had already addressed, he asked with evident curiosity:

"Can you tell me anything about this mansion, monsieur?"

"People say it is the eighth wonder of the world; and upon my word, it must be wonderful; the work has been going on for five years," responded the man.

"To whom does it belong?"

"To a young millionaire, who has spent his money lavishly and very foolishly, I believe."

"Do you know his name?"

"I believe the name is Saint Harem or Saint-Herem —"

"There is no more doubt," murmured the old man. "But why should he name it *Saint-Ramon?*"

Again he seemed buried in sad reflections, until aroused from his reverie by his companion's voice.

"How singular, after all," the man was saying. "A rich marquis should know only people with equipages; and yet, outside of two or three good carriages, the whole procession consists of *fiacres and cabriolets.*"

"Singular, indeed," repeated the old man. "But can you tell me the time?"

"Half-past-ten," the man informed him.

"I am to be at Chaillot at midnight only," said the old man to himself. "It leaves me ample time to investigate this mystery. What a strange coincidence."

After some hesitation, the old man entered the gate, glided into the obscurity of a by-path shaded by secular elm-trees, and walked on toward the mansion. Notwithstanding his evident preoccupation, he could not help

remarking the immense quantity of flowers that banked the main avenue, their thousand variegated colors illuminated by a profusion of many-hued lanterns and glittering glass candelabra of all shapes and shades.

This fairy-land avenue ended in a vast hemicycle as brightly illuminated, beyond which arose the *Saint Ramon* mansion, a veritable palace which, by the beauty and grandeur of its architecture, recalled the most brilliant days of the Renaissance.

Crossing the hemicycle, the old man reached an immense porch leading to the peristyle. Through the glass doors that enclosed this antechamber in all its length, he could see an army of powdered footmen in magnificent livery, while around him a continual stream of carriages unloaded a multitude of men, women and young girls, whose extreme simplicity of toilet seemed in little harmony with the splendors of this enchanted palace.

Urged on by an invincible curiosity, the old mulatto followed the ever increasing throng into the peristyle; then passing through a double row of footmen, in resplendent blue and

silver liveries, and standing as impassible as soldiers, he finally reached the reception room, where another army of servants in blue coats, black silk breeches and white silk stockings, stood in array. Although the modest appearance of the guests seemed little befitting the princely luxury of the house in which they were received, the stranger noticed, with some surprise, that the most respectful deference was shown to all. He paused but a moment here, however, passing almost immediately into the music gallery, beyond which was an immense circular salon, surmounted by a dome and forming the center of three other galleries which served as ball room, banquet hall, and billiard room. These four galleries — including the music hall — were connected by wide passages paved in rich mosaics and adorned with a profusion of exotic plants, while they were covered with glass domes, giving the whole the appearance of a hot-house.

We shall not attempt to describe the splendor, elegance, noble grandeur and sumptuousness of the furnishings of these vast rooms, dazzling with gildings and paintings,sparkling

with lights, crystals and flowers, reflected indefinitely by enormous mirrors, but will merely mention the rare magnificence that gave this palace its royal, monumental character. The salon and galleries were adorned with allegorical paintings and sculptures that would have made the renown of the most beautiful castle in existence. The most illustrious artists of the day had contributed to this superb work. Ingres, Delacroix, Scheffer, Paul Delaroche, and other future celebrities, such as Couture, Gerome, etc., had been employed by the opulent and intelligent creator of this palace. On the banquet table was displayed a marvel of silverware worthy of the epoch of Benvenuto; candelabra, ewers, ice basins, fruit bowls, flower vases, all would have done honor to a musèe by the rich purity of form and the precious finish and delicacy that characterized each piece.

One odd peculiarity of the vast circular salon must not be omitted, however. Above a gigantic white marble chimney, a veritable monument to the bold genius of David — our Michaël Angelo — were a number of allegorical

figures in relief, representing arts and industries, and supporting a large oval frame incrusted in the entablature of the chimney. This frame enclosed a painting which might have been attributed to Velasquez. It was the portrait of a pale man, with a harsh, austere countenance, hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, and high, polished forehead; a brown gown, half in the style of a dressing gown and half way resembling the gown of a monk, gave the figure the imposing character of those saints and martyrs so numerous in the Spanish school of painting; an appearance emphasized, moreover, by a gold aureole which seemed to cast its dazzling reflections on the austere, pensive face. Below, traced in large, Gothic letters in a space formed by the foliage of the border, were these two words:

SAINT RAMON.

Still following the throng, the old mulatto finally found himself before this chimney. At sight of the portrait, he stood for a moment in amazement; then, overcome by emotion, tears filled his eyes and he murmured softly:

"Poor friend! it is indeed he! But why the word *saint* prefixed to his name? Why that aureole around his brow? Why this mystic appearance? And besides, what a strange celebration! Though poorly dressed, and a stranger, I entered without meeting resistance, or even an inquiry."

At this moment a servant bearing fruits and ices approached and offered him refreshments, which he refused; he was striving, but in vain, to guess what might be the condition of the people around him. All the men were modestly attired; some in black frock-coats, others in new blouses, while a few wore the customary evening dress; all maintained a discreet reserve, though they expressed their delight to one another in low voices; and yet, strange to say, far from appearing amazed at the riches accumulated in this palace, they seemed perfectly at ease and not at all awed by the magnificence of their surroundings.

The women and young girls, however, seemed more embarrassed and intimidated; they naively admired the splendor of the place

and exchanged comments and observations in whispers.

Anxious to penetrate this singular mystery, the old mulatto again approached the chimney and joined a group of guests who were contemplating the portrait of *Saint-Ramon.*

"Do you see that portrait, Juliette?" a tall, robust man, with a good natured countenance, was asking his wife. "That good man is well entitled to his name. There are many saints in Paradise who are mere idlers beside him, if we are to judge by the good he has done."

"How is that, Michel?" queried the wife, inquisitively.

"We owe these five years of well-paid work to this worthy man, my dear," explained the husband. "Thanks to this M. Saint-Ramon, I have earned sufficiently in the last few years to make us all happy and contented, and save a great deal besides."

"But, my dear Michel," remonstrated the wife, "this is not the man who ordered and paid for the work. M. Saint-Herem did all

that, and it was he who welcomed us so kindly when we came this evening."

"That may be, Juliette. But whenever M. Saint Herem came into the place to watch us at work, he never failed to say: 'My children, were it not for the riches I have inherited, I could not give you this work and pay you as you deserve. You must therefore reserve all your gratitude for the memory of the man who left me so much money; it was he who accomplished the hardest task, hoarding his wealth cent by cent, depriving himself of every comfort, while I have nothing to do but spend this treasure liberally. To spend is my duty! Of what use are riches, if not to do good! Remember the good old miser then, and bless his avarice; it gives me the pleasure of giving you work in the building of a magnificent monument, and to you it gives ample salaries, honestly earned!"

"All the same, Michel, we must not forget M. Saint-Herem and give him a share of our gratitude."

"You are right, Juliette. He is a noble

young man, and he and his uncle make a famous pair."

The old mulatto had listened to this conversation with as much interest as astonishment, and as he wandered from group to group, he heard nothing but a chorus of praises and blessings in favor of Saint-Ramon, the worthy miser, and of his nephew, whose nobility of heart and liberality none could laud too highly.

"Is it a dream?" mused the old man. "Who can believe that these praises are addressed to the memory of a miser — a memory usually cursed and execrated by the living! And can it be the heir of this miser, the dispenser of his wealth, who rehabilitates him thus? And why are these workmen invited to this inauguration? It must be a dream!"

But the old mulatto's amazement was still more augmented by another singular contrast at this moment. He had suddenly met a group of men in evening dress, with many decorations in their buttonholes, accompanied by women in elegant toilettes. A short distance further on was Florestan Saint-Herem, more brilliant

and gay than ever in this atmosphere of luxury and splendor. He was standing at the extremity of the gallery adjoining the reception-room, welcoming his guests with the utmost grace and courtesy, greeting every one with a cordial smile and addressing a few words of gracious affability to each woman or young girl, charming and placing the most timid at their ease by his unaffected sincerity. It was while accomplishing the duties of this most admirable hospitality, that he caught his first glimpse of the beautiful Countess Zomaloff, as she entered the first saloon, accompanied by Princess Wileska and the Duke de Riancourt.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Although he had long known the Duke de Riancourt, Florestan had never met the princess and her niece: but seeing him enter with the two ladies, he hastened toward him with a welcoming smile.

"My dear Saint-Herem," said the duke, "allow me to present Princess Wileska and the Countess Zomaloff. These ladies hope you will think it no indiscretion on their part if they visit your mansion and its wonders with me, according to the invitation you extended yesterday."

"My dear duke, I am only too flattered by the honor of this visit," replied the young man, "and I shall be very happy to show you what you are pleased to call the *wonders of this house.*"

"M. de Riancourt was right to speak of wonders," rejoined Madame Zomaloff, "for I admit that we are so dazzled by a first glance,

that we can not conscientiously admire any one thing."

"My dear Saint-Herem," resumed the duke, "I may as well make a clean breast of it and admit that the countess' visit is not entirely disinterested. I have told her of your intentions concerning this place, and as I am to have the pleasure and honor of bestowing my name on the countess in a week, you understand that I cannot decide without her approval — since, after all, I stand somewhat in the light of — of a husband."

"Really, madame," observed Florestan gaily to the countess, "since the duke anticipates thus on his happiness, do you not think it only right that he should bear the whole consequences of his revelation? Therefore, as a husband never gives his arm to his wife, you may perhaps do me the pleasure of accepting mine!"

By this sally Saint-Herem spared himself the obligation of offering his arm to Princess Wileska, who, in his eyes, appeared a much less agreeable companion than her beautiful niece. He therefore led the way with the

countess, while M. de Riancourt followed with the princess.

"I have traveled much," remarked the countess to her companion, "and I have never seen anything that could equal — not in magnificence, for any millionaire can purchase magnificence with his money — but the marvelous taste which has presided over the construction of this place. It is a veritable musée of splendors — allow me to pause and admire the superb paintings of this ceiling."

"After the admiration of the work comes the reward to the author; does it not, madame?" returned Florestan with a smile. "One word from your lips, countess, will make the artist, who painted this ceiling, the happiest and proudest man in the universe," he concluded, with a wave of the hand toward one of the most illustrious masters of the modern school.

"A thousand thanks for procuring me such good fortune," replied the countess, advancing toward the artist.

"My dear friend," said Florestan, "the

Countess Zomaloff wishes to express to you all her admiration for your work."

"Not my admiration only, but my gratitude also," rejoined the young woman graciously. "The exquisite pleasure given by such a master-piece, is a debt contracted toward its creator."

"However precious and flattering such praises may be to me," returned the artist, with a modesty marked by good taste, "I can only accept a share of it. Pray allow me to place myself *hors de cause*, I can then express myself more freely. For instance, let us take the painting of the concert gallery, which you will admire by and by; they are due to our Raphaël — M. Ingrès. Well, this monumental work, which in the future will furnish art pilgrims as much cause of admiration as the most beautiful frescoes of Rome, Pisa, or Florence, would perhaps never have existed were it not for my excellent friend Saint-Herem. Was it not he who gave our French Raphaël the subject of one of his immortal pages? Truly, madame, in these days of vulgar luxuries and brutal magnificences, is it not

a phenomenon to meet a *Mèdicis*, as in the brightest epoch of Italian republics?"

"You are right," said the countess, enthusiastically, "and history is just in illustrating —"

"Forgive the interruption, countess," laughed Florestan, "but I am as modest as my illustrious friend; and for fear your admiration should be thrown away on an unworthy object, I shall point out the veritable *Medicis* — This is he."

As he spoke, he designated the portrait above the chimney.

"What a pensive, austere face!" exclaimed the countess, gazing at the painting with a feeling of mingled surprise and curiosity. Then, as her eyes fell on the inscription below, she added with increased astonishment: "Saint-Ramon? — Who is he?"

"A saint of my own, madame," laughed Florestan. "He was my uncle; and although I am not yet a pope, I have taken the liberty to canonize this admirable man in recognition of his long martyrdom during life and the miracles he accomplished after his death."

"SAINT RAMON? WHO IS HE?"

"His long martyrdom and his miracles!" echoed the countess. "You must be jesting, monsieur?"

"Not at all, madame. My uncle Ramon endured the most atrocious privations during his long life, for he was pitilessly and sublimely avaricious — this was his martyrdom. At his death, I inherited his enormous wealth and conceived this prodigious work of art — these are his miracles. I have sanctified his memory by gratitude — this is his canonization. As you see, it is a veritable legend taken from the *Lives of the Saints.*"

Struck by the originality of the young man, Madame Zomaloff remained silent for a moment, absorbed in deep meditation; while the duke, who until then had loitered some distance behind, approached them.

"My dear Florestan," he said, "I have been very eager to address you a really odd question since my arrival. Who are all these people? I recognize a few eminent artists, here and there, and a renowned architect, but none of the rest. The princess and myself have vainly searched the key to the enigma.

They are all quiet and reserved, and the young girls appear very modest, while a few are really pretty; but I am anxious to learn to what class of society they belong!"

"Since M. de Riancourt has the courage to ask you so indiscreet a question," broke in the countess, "I shall admit that I share his curiosity."

"You have no doubt remarked," said Florestan, with a smile, "that the persons assembled here this evening do not belong to what we call the aristocracy —"

"True, indeed."

"Yet, madame, a few moments ago you were happy to meet the great artist who designed the dome you so much admired, were you not?"

"Indeed, the meeting caused me great pleasure, I assure you."

"I believe you also approve me for inviting him, as well as many of his colleagues, to the inauguration of their united work?"

"The invitation certainly seemed almost a duty on your part, monsieur."

"Well, madame, this duty, inspired by

gratitude, I have fulfilled toward all who have contributed to the construction of this house, from the greatest artist to the most humble workman. All are here with their families, to enjoy the splendors they have created. Is it not just that the skillful and obscure man who chiseled the golden cup should moisten his lips in it, once, at least, in his life?"

"What!" cried the duke in stupefaction, "these are carpenters, gilders, blacksmiths, paper-hangers, ebonists, masons!—even masons! Why, it is absurd, impossible, incredible!"

"My dear duke, do you know the habits of the bees?" queried Florestan.

"Very little," replied the duke stiffly.

"Their habits are most savage and impertinent, my dear duke. Those insolent creatures — under the fabulous pretext that they have constructed their hives — have the impudence to inhabit them. And, what is more shocking still, they claim their right to the sweet honey on which they have so steadily and intelligently labored through the season—"

"Well, and what do you conclude from that?"

"I conclude from it that, through gratitude at least, we should allow the poor, laboring human bees the innocent pleasure of inhabiting for a single day the gilded hive they have built for idle drones like us, who enjoy the honey gathered by others."

The countess, who had drawn a little apart, now again placed her hand on Florestan's arm and gently led him a little away from her aunt and M. de Riancourt.

"Monsieur de Saint-Herem," she said with emotion, as they walked slowly on, "your idea is not only charming, but of a touching delicacy. I am no longer astonished at the air of contentment which pervades around us, and which I have remarked on the features of your guests. The more I think of it, the more generous and just it seems to me. After all, as you say, this is the work of these laborers, and you have honored and dignified labor by this fête. From your point of view, this mansion must be far more than an object of art and luxury to you, for many precious souvenirs are attached to its creation."

"You are right, madame."

"Then —"

"Go on, madame,"

"I cannot understand why —"

"Why do you hesitate? Pray, explain your thought!"

There was a moment of silence, then she resumed, with some embarrassment:

"Two days ago, in speaking of the difficulty of purchasing a mansion as large and sumptuous as I desired, M. de Riancourt recalled the fact that you wished to sell this property."

"Yes; the duke wrote to me, requesting permission to visit the house. I begged him to wait till this evening, as he could then see the reception-rooms to more advantage — but I did not then anticipate the honor of receiving you."

"Monsieur de Saint-Herem," she said, still hesitatingly, "you have been very indulgent to me — will you allow me one more question?"

"Indulgence in this instance has been so sweet and agreeable to me, that I shall thank you for the opportunity of exercising it once more. What is it?"

"How can you have the courage, or, rather — I shall use a very harsh word, I fear — how can you have the ingratitude to leave this house, which you have created with so much love, and to which are attached so many kind, generous souvenirs?"

"Upon my word, madame!" he replied carelessly, as if he were saying the most natural thing in the world, "I must sell this mansion because I am ruined, completely ruined. This is my last day of good fortune and wealth, and you must admit, madame, that, thanks to your presence here, this day could not have a more brilliant or happier evening!"

CHAPTER XIX.

Florestan de Saint-Herem had uttered the words "I am ruined" with so much simplicity and carelessness that the countess gazed at him dumbfounded for a moment, unable to believe what she had heard.

"What!" she finally gasped, "you are —"

"Ruined! completely ruined!" he repeated. "My uncle left me five millions five years ago; I have spent it all, plus eighteen hundred thousand francs. The sale of this mansion, however, with its furniture, paintings, silver, etc., will pay my debts and leave me in possession of about a hundred thousand francs. With that I shall retire to some smiling country place and turn shepherd; a charming contrast, especially when I recall my past existence. What marvelous, impossible dreams—changed into realties for myself, my friends, my mistresses — my gilded whirlwind carried in my train! What renown is mine! how all that was

beautiful, elegant, sumptuous, *recherché*, was swallowed up in my dazzling orbit! Would you believe, madame, that my reputation for liberality had spread over Europe? Nay, more; a Chandernagor lapidary sent me an Indian saber with its handle studded with gems, enclosing a pretty, laconic note in these words: 'This cimeter belonged to Tippo-Saëb; it should belong to M. Saint-Herem. The weapon is worth twenty-five thousand francs, payable at the Rothschild house, in Paris. Received twenty-five thousand francs.' Yes; the rarest and most precious objects of art were naïvely addressed to me from all parts of the world; the finest horses walked into my stables, the most exquisite wines filled my cellars; the most illustrious chefs fought for the privilege of serving me, and the celebrated Dr. Gasterini — do you know him, madame?"

"Who has not heard of the most famous gourmand the world has ever known?"

"Well, madame, that great man proclaimed that he had eaten as good a dinner in my house as in his own — a compliment he could

not pay, even to the table of M. de Talleyrand. Ah! madame, what a grand, complete, beautiful life! And women! Ah! women!"

"Monsieur! —"

"Fear not, madame, I shall speak of women only as objects of art. And really, can there exist a more charming pretext for magnificence? Luxury is but the accessory; a woman is so pretty, adorned and surrounded by all the products of art. Believe me, madame, I have the certainty of having ruined myself generously, nobly and intelligently. I have neither a foolish expense nor a wicked action to reproach myself! It is with a mind full of delicious souvenirs, a heart full of serenity, that I see my fortune take wings!"

His tone was so sincere, the truth of his words and sentiments were so strongly expressed on his loyal, handsome face, that the countess could not but be convinced of the reality of all he said.

"I must admit, monsieur," she observed softly, "that such philosophy confounds me! Now that the hour of renouncing such a life

is at hand, not a word of bitterness escapes your lips!"

"Words of bitterness! after so much joy and happiness? Ah, madame, that would be blasphemy!"

"You leave this enchanted palace without regret, without even a sigh, and at the very moment when you would have enjoyed it?"

"What will you, madame? I did not believe myself so near the end until a week ago, when my rascally steward showed me my accounts, and I resign myself to the inevitable with a good grace. Besides, in leaving this palace, created with so much love, I am like the poet who has written the last stanza to his poem, the artist who has given the last touch to his canvas; there still remains the imperishable glory of having achieved a masterpiece. This palace is a monument of art and magnificence; it shall always be the temple of luxury, fêtes, pleasures. Ah! how ungrateful I should be to complain of my fate! It is you, madame, who shall be the divinity of this temple; for you shall purchase it, will you not? You would grace it so well! Do not lose the

opportunity; for, as the duke has informed you, Lord Wilmot has made me very pressing offers. I should be sorry to sell it to him; he is so ugly, and so is his wife, and so are his five daughters! What divinities for this temple, which seems built expressly for you! I beg you, madame, take it for the love of that art you appreciate so well. Only, be merciful to my worthy uncle! It is a magnificent painting and, although the portrait and the name of *Saint Ramon* are often repeated in sculptured medallions on diverse parts of the façade, I would be happy to think that this brave uncle — from the height of his marble monument — would assist for centuries to the pleasures of which he deprived himself during life!"

"My dear Florestan," interrupted the duke, touching his elbow, "it is all very beautiful and wonderful. But eighteen hundred thousand francs — including furniture and silver, of course — is an exorbitant price."

"I am completely disinterested in the matter, my dear duke," replied the young man, with a smile; "those eighteen hundred thou-

sand francs belong to my creditors, and I shall therefore be horribly tenacious on the conditions. Moreover, as I have already told you, Lord Wilmot offers me that sum and urges me to accept it."

"That may be, but I am sure you would grant me a favor you would refuse Lord Wilmot. Come, Saint-Herem, don't be inflexible — give me a discount, and — "

"Monsieur de Saint-Herem," broke in the countess, "I shall take the house on the conditions you proposed."

"Heaven be praised!" exclaimed Florestan, extending his hand toward her. "My good star never deserts me, madame; the affair is settled."

"But, madame — " interposed the duke, surprised and annoyed at the liberality of his future wife, and still hoping to obtain a reduction on the price, "this is a matter involving considerable money! And at the point we have reached, it is impossible that you should act without my authority. When we are married — "

"Monsieur de Saint-Herem, you have my

word," interrupted the countess, with a scornful glance at the duke. "This purchase is a personal matter; my steward will negotiate with yours to-morrow, at any time you may wish."

"Agreed, madam," assented Florestan; then turning to M. de Riancourt, he added gaily, "I hope you will bear me no ill-will, my dear duke; you should show yourself to be a real *grand seigneur*, and not bargain like a banker."

The orchestra, which had been silent for a quarter of an hour, now struck up a new cotillion.

"Pardon me, countess," resumed the young man, "but I must leave you. I am to dance this cotillion with the charming daughter of one of the best workmen who assisted in the building of this mansion — or rather of *your mansion*, madame. And I cannot tell you how happy I am to carry away that thought in leaving you."

He bowed respectfully, and vanished in the throng.

"My dear Foedora," said the princess, who had remarked the long tête-à-tête of her niece

and Saint-Herem with much impatient anxiety, "it is growing late, and we promised Madame de Sardaigne to come early."

"Allow me to observe, madame," put in the duke, addressing his *fiancè* in his turn, "that you were too hasty in this matter. Saint-Herem is forced to sell this house to pay his debts, and with a little perseverance we could have obtained a reduction of fifty thousand crowns at least, especially if you had requested it yourself — some things are very difficult to refuse a pretty woman!" he concluded with his most amiable smile.

"My dear Foedora, what are you thinking about?" resumed the princess to her niece, who was leaning on a gilded mantel covered with flowers, absorbed in deep reflection and deaf to all remonstrances. "Foedora," repeated her aunt, tugging gently at her sleeve, "what are you dreaming about?"

"I am thinking of M. de Saint-Herem," said the conntess, regretfully awakening from her reverie. "All this is so strangely odd —"

"I really believe that despair at his ruin must have impaired poor Florestan's mind," ob-

served M. de Riancourt, sententiously. "One must be mad to inaugurate a mansion with such a ball; it savors of socialism!"

"The duke is right; the thing is absurd and ridiculous," chimed in the princess. "What an amusing story we shall have to relate at the embassy! — but, my dear Foedora, why don't you answer? — what ails you?"

"I don't know," replied the countess; "what I experience, is most singular."

"You want air, my dear countess," rejoined the duke, with solicitude. "This agglomeration of the masses is stifling; and though the apartments are spacious — "

"Foedora, are you ill?" broke in the princess.

"No, indeed," declared the countess, "the emotion I experience is, on the contrary, full of sweetness and charm. To tell you the truth, my dear duke, I scarcely know how to express — "

"In mercy, explain yourself countess," urged the duke, anxiously. "The strong perfume of these flowers probably affects you strangely."

"No, that is not it. I hesitate to speak, because you will both think me so strange, so eccentric —"

"Ah! countess, how could we think you otherwise than charming!" exclaimed the duke gallantly.

"Foedora, explain yourself," said her aunt impatiently.

"I am quite willing to do so, but I shall surprise you greatly I know," she said, with a confident air; then turning to the duke, she added archly: "It seems to me —"

"It seems to you," repeated he, encouragingly.

"That —"

"Go on."

"That I am dying to marry M. de Saint-Herem," she concluded, very low.

"Madame!" cried the amazed duke, turning crimson. "Madame!"

"What is it, my dear duke?" inquired the princess. "How flushed your face is!"

"My dear countess," rejoined the duke, with a forced smile, "the jest is rather —"

"Pray, give me your arm," interrupted

Foedora carelessly, "we are already very late. But then, it is all your own fault; how is it that you, the personification of *exactitude*, did not proclaim the hour of eleven long ago?"

"Ah! madame, I assure you I am not in a laughing humor. Your cruel jest wounded me to the heart."

"I was not aware that you possessed such a vulnerable heart."

"Your suspicion is unjust; I would die for you!"

"Really?"

The duke raised his eyes to heaven and heaved a long sigh.

"If I were to ask anything of you," she retorted, "it would not be so heroic a sacrifice, I assure you."

The carriage was now announced, and the party left the mansion. Almost at the same instant the old mulatto was also turning away from the place, dazzled and amazed at what he had heard and seen, and still dreaming of the blessings showered on the name of Saint-Ramon by the guests of this peculiar fête.

"Half-past eleven," murmured the old man,

as the hour struck from a distant steeple. "I shall be there at midnight — and what shall I learn? Ah! what anguish is mine!"

And with a deep sigh he slowly began the ascent of the declivity, stretching along the Seine, to the Rue Chaillot.

CHAPTER XX.

The old mulatto wended his way slowly toward the heights of Chaillot, until he reached the church of that poor, populous *faubourg.*

To his astonishment, he found the church in a blaze of lights. Through the wide open door could be seen the sanctuary and altar, brilliantly illuminated with tapers and decorated with flowers, as though in anticipation of some imposing ceremony, while grouped in the street and surrounding windows, a throng of curiosity seekers and belated wayfarers excitedly discussed the approaching event.

"They cannot delay much longer," observed one.

"No, for it is nearly midnight," rejoined another.

"Rather a strange hour for a marriage."

"Undoubtedly; but with such a dowry one can afford peculiar things."

"Who is to be married at this odd hour?" questioned the old man from the last speaker.

"You must be a stranger in this part of the city," replied the man addressed, "or you would know all about the *six marriages*, which for four years have taken place on the night of May 11 and 12."

"May 11 and 12," repeated the old man, with a start. "But why do you call it the *six marriages?*"

"Because each year six young girls, with a dowry of ten thousand francs each, are married here."

"A dowry of ten thousand francs! And from whom?"

"From a worthy man who died five years ago, whose name is as popular and as reverentially blessed in Chaillot as the *Petit manteau bleu* in Paris."

"And who is this worthy man, in whose name these young girls are so generously dowered?" pursued the old mulatto, with a slight tremor in his voice.

"He was called Père Richard," returned the man in a deferential tone.

"And why does this Père Richard do so much good after his death?" continued the old man, making an effort to conceal his emotion.

"Simply because this was his idea, and because his son religiously carries out his last wishes," explained the man. "And everybody can tell you what a noble man M. Louis Richard is. Himself, his wife and child live on three or four thousand francs a year, at the most, although he must have inherited a large fortune from his father to enable him to bestow annually a dowry of ten thousand francs each on six young girls, not counting the expenses of the 'school' and the 'House of Providence.'"

"Excuse the curiosity of a stranger; but you speak of a school and —"

"Yes; the school is directed by Madame Mariette, M. Louis Richard's wife. The school was founded for the benefit of twenty-five boys and as many girls, who remain there until they have attained the age of twelve, when they begin their apprenticeship. The children are fed, clothed and educated and

receive ten sous a day. In this manner, parents are induced to send them to school instead of forcing them to work in shops."

"And the school is under the direction of M. Louis Richard's wife?'

"Yes; she claims to have suffered cruelly through her own want of education when she was only a poor shop girl, and she is particularly happy in the thought that she may save others the sufferings she endured."

"You also spoke of another institution?"

"That house was founded for the benefit of twelve poor, crippled women who cannot work. It is under the direction of Madame Lacombe."

"Who is Madame Lacombe?"

"Madame Richard's godmother, a good, worthy soul, who lost one hand years ago. She is the personification of gentleness and patience. She can truly sympathize with the crippled women under her charge, for she says that her goddaughter and herself often suffered the pangs of hunger before the former's marriage to M. Richard. But here is the wedding procession."

The old man turned to the street and saw a

gay cortege approaching, led by Louis, with Madame Lacombe on his arm, closely followed by Mariette leading a pretty boy of four years by the hand.

Madame Lacombe was totally unrecognizable. Her face, formerly so haggard and worn, was the picture of health, while her countenance beamed with happiness and benevolence; her silver white hair was smoothly brushed back beneath a dainty lace cap, and her silk dress was half concealed by a beautiful cashmere shawl — a tasty toilet which gave her a most dignified and imposing appearance.

Louis Richard's features bore an expression of grave and reserved felicity, and he seemingly realized the full grandeur of the duties he had imposed upon himself; while Mariette, who had grown still prettier in this beneficial atmosphere, distinguished herself by that air of sweet gravity so becoming to young mothers. In her legitimate pride, she still retained the modest dress of her girlhood and wore the coquettish little cap of the shop-girl; and Providence, no doubt, rewarded her for her modesty, for she looked bewitchingly fresh

and pretty beneath the lace head-gear, with its knots of pale blue ribbon, as she smiled sweetly on the blond rosy child at her side.

Next came six young girls, in white dresses and crowned with orange blossoms, accompanied by their fiancées and relatives, all belonging to the laboring class; then came the twenty-four couples united in the four previous years, followed by the school children and the crippled old women who had found refuge in the charitable institutions founded with the miser's money.

The old mulatto gazed in silent reflection at the procession, while his neighbors commented freely on the memorable event.

"They owe all this happiness to old Richard," he heard some one say.

"And to his son," added another voice.

"Undoubtedly; but the son would have been powerless without the father's money."

"Do you know that more than a hundred and fifty persons assembled here owe everything to the good old man?"

"Yes; and in the last four years, six or

seven hundred persons must have shared the benefits of the inheritance."

"And if M. Louis lives thirty years longer, the number will reach five or six thousands — thousands saved from misery and crime, perhaps."

"You forget the children of these happily married couples, who will have the advantages of education and good breeding procured by this generous dowry."

"You are right; the good accomplished by old Richard is beyond calculation. What a pity so few know how to spend their money!"

"Yes; but there are few such men as Richard and his son. But why are you weeping?" concluded the speaker, turning suddenly toward the old mulatto.

"The praises I hear on all sides of—of this Richard and his son, and the sight of so much happiness causes me a strange emotion," explained the old man.

"If you are interested in the ceremony, you may follow the cortege to the *House of Providence*, my good man," returned his first

informant, as he moved toward the entrance of the church.

The old man stood motionless for a few moments, then slowly followed the throng into the sacred edifice. Throughout the whole solemn ceremony, he seemed plunged into a sort of ecstasy, as if a sudden revelation had opened an immense, dazzling horizon, hitherto veiled to his eyes. Burying his face in his hands, he sank into a deep meditation from which he was aroused by the grave sonorous voice of the officiating priest addressing the newly-married couples.

"And now that your union is consecrated by God," he was saying, "continue the honest, laborious life which has been repaid by the happiness you now enjoy; never forget that you owe this just remuneration of your courage in adversity to a man gifted with the most tender and generous affection for his brothers; for, faithful to his duties as a Christian, he does not look upon himself as the master, but as the dispenser of his riches. In giving M. Richard a son so worthy of him, the Lord has

recompensed that great man, and his memory shall live amongst men. Your gratitude will create his immortality; his name shall be blessed by you, by your children and your children's children; the venerated name of M. Richard shall be engraved on your hearts as a souvenir of rare virtue!"

A murmur of approbation greeted these words, drowning the stifled sobs of the old mulatto whose face was still buried in his hands.

The ceremony was now over, and the noise and bustle of the dispersing throng recalled him to himself. Rising from his knees, he hurried to the door, where he stood, trembling in every limb, waiting for the passage of the leading group in the procession.

As Louis Richard crossed the threshold, the old man's hand came in contact with his own, causing him to turn in that direction. Seeing the bowed head and shabby clothes of the stranger, the young man slipped a gold coin between his fingers, saying kindly: "Take it, and pray for *Père Richard.*"

The old man eagerly grasped the coin, and raising it to his lips, burst into tears. Then leaning once more on his cane, he slowly followed the gay party.

CHAPTER XXI.

The *House of Providence* was built on the highest point of Chaillot, in a healthful, beautiful spot, and was surrounded by a large, shady garden which served as pleasure grounds to its inmates.

The night was calm and serene, and the atmosphere was impregnated with the sweet fragrance of a profusion of spring blossoms, while numerous gas-jets illuminated the wide avenue that led to the entrance of the principal building.

The stranger, who still followed the throng, soon found himself in the midst of a semicircle silently grouped around a high porch, listening to the following words from a voice that thrilled him with strange emotion:

"My friends," Louis was saying, "five years ago to-night, I lost the best of fathers in the frightful accident of the Versailles road. Being possessed of considerable wealth, my

father might have lived in comfort and idleness; but he deprived himself of all luxury, working for his daily bread, slowly accumulating riches by his parsimony and augmenting them year by year by his abnegation. Then came his premature death, and I mourned over the loss of the greatest friend of humanity; for, according to his last wishes, I have consecrated his wealth to the accomplishment of three great and noble duties:

"Toward children.

"Toward young girls.

"Toward women whom age and infirmities render incapable of work.

"To poor children, my father has provided elementary instructions; to young girls, so often exposed to the seductions of vice, he has assured the pure and sweet joys of family life, so often denied to children of poverty; to aged or infirm women, he has given rest and comfort for the remainder of their days.

"These last wishes I have faithfully carried out to the limits of the means he has left me. The good thus done may be small in comparison to the innumerable miseries of human-

ity; but the man who does what he can, *shares his bread* with his famished brother and does his duty. This is a duty imposed on all alike, and all should strive to reach that ideal. My father conceived that generous thought — I am but the agent, the echo. The accomplishment of this glorious duty would fill my life with boundless felicity, were it not that I must weep over the death of a beloved and deeply regretted father"

As the speaker uttered the last words, a wild commotion spread through the assemblage; overcome by his emotion, the old mulatto had fallen unconscious in the arms of his neighbors. On hearing the cause of the sudden agitation, Louis ordered that the stranger be carried to his own apartments on the ground floor of the building, where he could receive prompt and careful attention; insisting at the same time that the wedding festivities should go on uninterrupted, and that Mariette and Madame Lacombe should preside in his place at the supper table in the garden.

In the meantime, the old man had been transported into Louis' study, which was

furnished with the few odd pieces of furniture carried away from the old home so long shared in common between the father and son. When the young man entered, the stranger was still unconscious, his white hair falling in disorder over his brow and his unkempt beard almost totally concealing his features.

Frightened at his immobility, Louis despatched the attendant for a bottle of spirits; then bending over him he caught the emaciated hand to feel the pulse. As he peered anxiously into the withered face, the stranger turned slightly and uttered a few unintelligible words.

The sound of the voice struck him strangely. Bending lower he tried to distinguish the features of the patient; but the semi-obscurity of the room and the disordered hair and beard rendered his examination fruitless.

Then the mulatto's eyes opened slowly; raising his head languidly, his gaze wandered over the room and rested on the familiar objects.

"Where am I?" he murmured. "Is it a dream? My God! my God!"

This time the voice was more distinct and Louis trembled visibly; then a bitter smile came to his lips and he shook his head sadly.

"Alas!" he said, in a low tone, "what illusions sorrow will cause." Then turning to the patient, he added kindly: "Do you feel stronger now?"

At these words, the stranger sat bolt upright, and catching Louis' hand kissed it rapturously.

"There, don't agitate yourself," resumed the young man. "I have done nothing to win your gratitude. Some day I may be able to do more. But tell me how you feel. Was it fatigue or weakness that caused your swoon?"

The old man still remained silent, his head bowed down and pressing Louis' hand convulsively to his breast.

A singular emotion filled the young man's heart, and the tears came into his eyes as he continued:

"Listen to me, father."

"Oh! again, again!" murmured the stranger, in a voice choked with emotion.

"Well, father—"

"Louis!" cried the old man, unable to control himself longer.

This single word, uttered with all the strength of his soul, was a revelation.

The young man started back as though a thunderbolt had fallen at his feet, and stood for a moment pale and trembling, his gaze fixed on the haggard features before him. The commotion was too violent, the moral shock too deep, to allow him to realize the astounding truth at once. It seemed like the sudden transition of deep night to the bright sunshine, which dazzles and renders us momentarily blind.

Then the reality suddenly burst on his dazed senses; throwing himself on his knees beside the couch, he brushed back the disheveled white hair from the stranger's face, and scanned the features of his father, disguised under a fictitious color. There was no longer any doubt; he threw his arms about the old man's neck, murmuring in a sort of filial

delirium: "You! — you, my father — Heaven be praised!"

* * * * * * *

We shall not attempt to describe this first explosion of joy and delirious happiness. Who can paint those affectionate embraces, those tender words that come from the heart and throw the soul into an ecstacy of bliss? When the first emotion had finally subsided, however, Louis eagerly questioned his father concerning those long years of separation.

"My dear child," began the father, "I slept for five years and awakened for the first time two days ago. I was in the wrecked car with Ramon and his daughter; but through some inexplicable chance my life was spared, though my leg was fractured and the fright drove me mad."

"You, my father?"

"Yes, I completely lost my reason."

"Heavens! how terrible!"

"A kind surgeon carried me to a place of safety and afterward conveyed me to the Versailles asylum. I was perfectly harmless and spoke only of my lost treasures. For four years

I remained in the same condition; then I gradually regained my reason, and two days since was pronounced cured. I cannot express what I experienced as memory came back to me, after these five years of slumber; but I blush to admit that my first thought was that of the miser. What had become of my wealth? what use had it been put to? The moment the doors of my prison opened before me, I flew to my notary's office. You can imagine his stupefaction when he recognized me. He then informed me that your first thought had been to act as trustee only to my riches, and to use merely enough for your existence until you reached the age of thirty-five. Then came your severe illness six months later, and fearing you might die without accomplishing your sacred task, you conceived other projects. 'What were these projects?' I asked. 'Wait until midnight to-morrow,' the notary replied, 'and go to the church at Chaillot. There you will learn all, and thank heaven to have given you such a son.' I had the patience to wait, my dear son, hoping to approach you without being recognized. Oh! my noble, beloved

son! if you knew what I have heard and seen! Thanks to your grandeur of soul and the pious ruse of your filial affection, I found my name blessed and venerated! If you knew what sudden revolution took place in me! While blessings were showered on my memory, it seemed to me that my soul had burst its terrestrial chains and was hovering above the world, just as the souls of good men must hover above us, while listening to the expressions of love and gratitude from those whom they have benefitted. But, alas! this illusion was of short duration — I was not deserving of these praises."

"You are mistaken, father," protested Louis. "Without your persevering economy I could never have accomplished anything. You placed the lever in my hand. My only merit has been to make good use of the immense force you concentrated at the price of innumerable sacrifices and privations. The horrible misery and the ignorance through which my beloved wife had suffered, the dangers to which they had exposed her, the cruel infirmity of her guardian, all these bitter things were a lesson to

me; Mariette, her godmother and myself have tried, as far as it lay in our power, to spare others what we had suffered — "

At this moment the door was burst suddenly open and Florestan de Saint-Herem dashed breathless into the room.

"Rejoice, oh! rejoice!" he cried, throwing himself into his friend's arms. "Saint-Ramon has performed the most wonderful of miracles!"

"What do you mean?" gasped the astonished Louis.

"Two hours ago I was completely ruined, and now I am richer than I ever was or ever will be. Only fancy, Louis, I am the possessor of gold mines, silver mines, diamonds of untold value, of fabulous riches — millions and millions, in fact! Oh! Saint-Ramon, how just I was to sanctify your name, to canonize you, for you are not ungrateful!"

"In mercy, explain yourself, Florestan!"

"One hour ago, as the ball was drawing to a close, a servant informed me that a lady had just arrived in a fiacre and requested to see me at once. Hastening to my apartments, I was amazed to find the Countess Zomaloff, a young

and beautiful widow, quietly waiting for me. This charming woman was to have married the Duke de Riancourt within a week and had purchased my house during the evening. My surprise was so great that for a moment I was unable to utter a word.

"'Monsieur de Saint-Herem,' she said, without a tremor of agitation in her voice, 'you must forgive me for disturbing you, but I shall retain you a few moments only — I am a widow and twenty-eight years of age; I had promised to marry the duke, and would probably have been foolish enough to keep my word if I had not met you. You have a generous heart and a lofty soul; the fête you have given this evening proves it; I admire your intellect and character, and your person pleases me. As for me, the step I am taking now gives you the opportunity of judging my worth — You may think my actions strange, improper, or eccentric — you are at liberty to appreciate me as you wish. If your judgment is favorable, however, I shall be proud and happy to become Madame de Saint-Herem and inhabit the Saint-Ramon mansion with you. My wealth is fabulous,

and you may dispose of it as you wish, for I confide my future blindly into your hands. I shall therefore await your decision anxiously. Good-night, Monsieur de Saint-Herem.'

"With these words the fairy vanished, my dear Louis, leaving me in such a state of dazzling happiness that I feared I would lose my reason."

"My dear Florestan," said his friend gravely, "the countess' frankness and blind confidence in you impose a great duty on you."

"I understand, my friend," rejoined Saint-Herem seriously. "I had a right to squander my own fortune; but to ruin a woman who trusts her whole future into my hands would be a piece of unparalleled infamy!"

* * * * * * *

One month later, Louis Richard, with his father and Mariette, assisted at the nuptial benediction of Florestan de Saint-Herem and Madame Zomaloff.

Notwithstanding his father's resurrection, Louis still continues to dispense charity around him, greatly aided in the benevolent task by old Richard himself, who now exhibits as much

zeal in relieving poverty and distress, as he formerly did in hoarding up his treasure and ministering to his one great passion or besetting sin — avarice.

May the twelfth is now doubly celebrated. A magnificent fête is given yearly by M. and Madame de Saint-Herem in honor of their first meeting, for the marriage of *convenance* has turned out to be one of love. But at midnight, they invariably leave the brilliantly illuminated Saint-Ramon mansion and accompany Louis and Mariette to their home, where they share the wedding supper of the six happy couples united on that day.

END.

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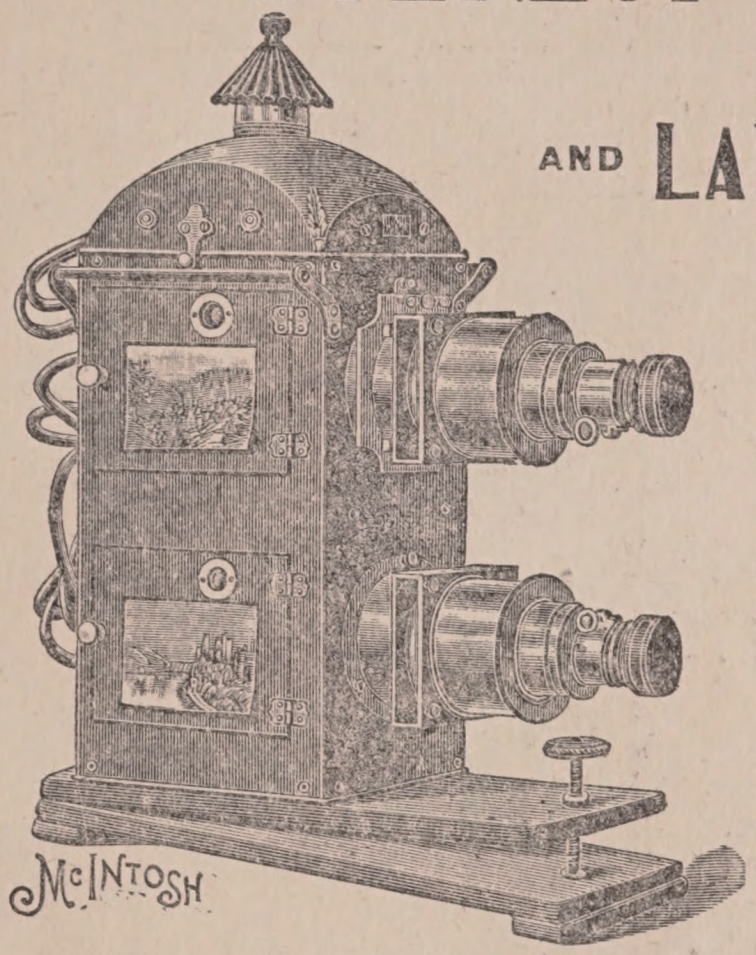

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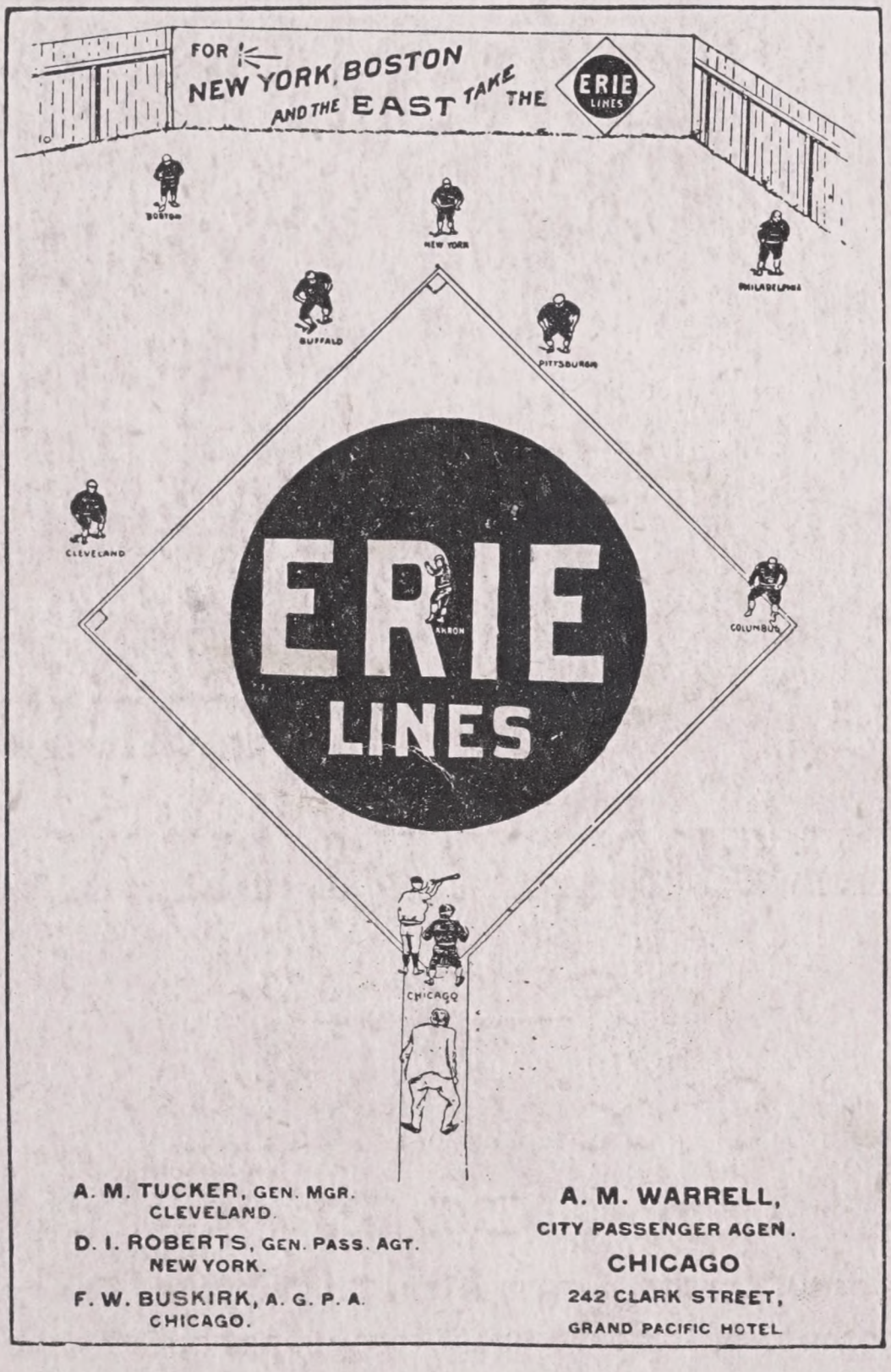

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